

II
Deathbound
Duke's Daughter:

**Erika
Aurelia**
and the
**Angel's
Crypt**

AUTHOR:
Terasu Senoo

ILLUSTRATOR:
Munashichi



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Deathbound Duke's Daughter 2

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and the
Angel's Crypt

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Terasu Senoo



ILLUSTRATOR:
Munashichi



“Oh my,
to bring
a girl
here of all
places...
What a
naughty
boy you
are.”

Angel

Erika Aurelia

Palug



*Oh, but how ironic as well.
To us beasts,
the wounds etched into
thine heart
are what make thy soul
beautiful beyond
compare.*

*Foolish
child...
to torture
yourself
until your
heart
was in
such a
ragged
state.*



Claus Hafan

“If you
want to
kill her,
you’ll have
to go
through
me first!”



“You’re
the
same as
ever,
Elric.”

Eduard Aurelia

“My glasses
were
crooked?
That’s odd,
I never
noticed..
Sorry to
bother you,
Eduard.”

Elric Actorius

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Prologue: Erika Aurelia, Destined to Die

Once upon a time, in a faraway place, there lived a young girl. She was the daughter of a ducal house famed for its alchemy. Her name was Erika Aurelia.

Only two months ago, the girl had suddenly awakened to memories that were not her own. What's more, if her conjecture was right, the world she was living in belonged to *Liber Monstrorum: The Winter Maiden and the Phantasmic Beasts*, a game she had played in another life. In this game, Erika Aurelia was the first victim of a serial murder.

Huh? Wait, if I enter the academy six years from now, won't I be the first to die?

Erika's life in the game was a tragedy. A villainess whose pathetic death served as just desserts for all her lying and cheating—that was the fate of Erika Aurelia.

However, this Erika—who carried regrets from a life where she was unreasonably stabbed over a love affair she didn't even remember having—was determined to use her memories of *Liber Monstrorum* as a weapon to survive no matter what.

She was soon visited by her first death flag, the game's first potential love interest. His name was Claus Hafan, and he was the heir to a house of magic.

In the plot of the original game, Erika antagonized Claus' sister, Anne, and lured her to the dangerous Seafarer's Ruins, where she would ultimately die. This event would force Claus to live with inescapable regret and sorrow. Inescapable, at least, until he met the heroine and learned to move on. Erika, on the other hand, would be the first to be killed by Anne, who was possessed by the evil spirit of the ruins.

This time around, Erika had deepened her friendship with Anne and tried to steer her away from the ruins. Unfortunately, owing to the curse on her necklace, both Claus and Anne had ended up in the danger zone.

Relying on the magic items her brother and talented alchemist Eduard left behind, Erika had plunged into the ruins alone to search for the siblings. She'd found Claus easily enough, but as the two of them looked for Anne, they got lost in the winding corridors, sprung a death trap, suffered a floor collapse, and accidentally revived an ancient monster.

Erika had managed to save Claus, Anne, and even the soul of the lonely beast sleeping in the innermost depths. Her life hanging by a thread, she had broken down her first death flag, but it would not be long before the next came creeping toward her.



The story begins at the Spring Palace, in the Wunderkammer of Eduard Aurelia. A Wunderkammer was the studio of an alchemist, a showcase of the world's natural history stuffed to the brim with special ores and the body parts of many a beast, phantasmal or otherwise.

At the work desk in the center of the room sat Eduard, a young man with blond hair and gentle green eyes. Beside him was Erika, who shared these same features, staring at his work with deep intrigue.

There was a shallow box on the table, its exterior an inconspicuous black and its interior upholstered with plush, ultramarine velvet. Atop the velvet rested a row of beautifully decorated wands, each about the length of a conductor's baton. They were all alchemists' wands embedded with magic spells.

The alchemists of this world cast magic from such wands, which had been imbued with their spells in advance. One wand could only contain one spell, and it had anywhere from fifty to a hundred charges. While this limited alchemists in comparison to their magician counterparts, they did not have to chant and could easily utilize convenient magic with the simple swing of a wand.

Of the orderly row, Eduard first lifted up the Magic Missile wand.

The wand's shaft was golden oak carved with spiraling grooves. Its wick was a mix of charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter while its handle was silver with an obsidian pommel. The tip was flint ornamented with more silver.

Eduard stared at the wand, confirming its quality before opening his mouth.

“A splendid wand. It should serve you well.”

He took out a case just big enough for a single wand and put the Magic Missile away. Next, he picked up the Hail of Stone wand. He carefully scrutinized this one as well before tucking it into its own container.

“Magic Missile and Hail of Stone are good choices. They compensate for each other’s weak points.”

“That’s a relief to hear, Eduard.”

Eduard had asked Erika to pick out some wands in the name of self-defense.

“With those two, you won’t just be able to protect yourself; you should be able to fight off a vicious beast.”

“I simply wanted to take precautions. You never know what might happen. Was it a tad excessive?” Erika asked.

“No, it’s always good to be cautious,” Eduard said as he handed over the two wand cases.

Erika meekly accepted them. She handed them to the miniature armored golem keeping a low profile beside her, and the golem, with exceedingly organic movements, tucked them away in a leather bag.

“You chose Jump and Levitate for emergency maneuvers. Well thought out on your part.”

“Yes, I heard there were many tall buildings in the capital.”

“And in preparation for natural disaster, you picked Disintegrate, Wall of Stone, and Barbed Wire. The Disintegrate wand is especially dangerous. You have to be very careful with it.”

“Of course.”

“Finally, a Magic Map wand for if you get lost. The capital can be quite confusing, after all.”

“I heard there are lots of ancient ruins underneath it as well.”

“Okay, I think you chose an optimal selection. I should give you a few fundamental wands too.”

Offering some courteous advice, Eduard handed over box after box.

“Thank you so very much, Eduard.”

Erika thanked him from the depths of her heart. Only with her brother’s generosity could she assemble so many different wands. With such a wonderful assortment at her disposal, she would not want for any sort of magic she might need.

However, even Eduard was unable to arrange for an Urðr-Sight wand—a wand that had performed so magnificently in her last exploration. The materials simply wouldn’t make it in time.

But now I’m prepared to deal with my next death flag.

Erika breathed a sigh of relief, and yet, as her mind wandered to her previous escapade, a shadow was cast over her face.

“Are you anxious about the royal capital? Father will be with you, so you should be fine unless something terribly drastic happens.” Eduard gently stroked the top of her head. He must have noticed her expression.

“Yes, let’s hope so.”

House Aurelia had received an invitation to a festive banquet hosted by Ignitia’s royal family. Their father, Duke Ernst, was obligated to attend. Erika’s heart swirled with fear and anxiety, dreading their departure.

August, First Prince of Ignitia, would raise her next death flag. Unsavory rumors about the “Foolish Prince” had even reached the ears of young children such as herself.

“I’d like to lend you my bag too, if I could, but—”

“Oh no, that bag is important to you. You have serious business to attend to, don’t you? You won’t make it in time if you have to repack.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Eduard had to set out somewhere to take part in some kind of investigation. Erika hadn’t asked about the details, but considering it took precedence over a royal invitation, she could tell it was significant. The worrywart that he was, Eduard had given Erika the tools to protect her in his stead.

“I need to get going. Another time, Erika.”

“Have a safe trip, Eduard.”

“Tell me all about your adventures when I get back.”

Eduard kissed Erika on the cheek and left the workshop, his bag in his hand.

“Good grief, what a secretive man.”

The voice raising this complaint did not belong to Erika.

“He must have his circumstances. It’s not our place to intrude. Besides, I’m not all that different, am I?”

“Heh heh, point taken.”

A laugh rumbled from within the golem-esque figure at her side. He was one of Erika’s secrets, and a powerful ally. Not a golem she made, but a monster from ancient times.

This was the evil spirit Erika had met in the Seafarer’s Ruins on that spring night two months prior—more precisely, the philosopher’s stone created by Aurelia’s ancestor, a twin-horned homunculus similar to a dragon. After losing in combat, he had been sealed away, and now he was one of Erika’s closest friends.

Once a nameless monster, he now chose to be the guardian beast of the girl who had offered him the name “Tirnanog.” However, only Erika knew of any of this. If the truth came out, it was possible he would be sealed away again, so he was instead disguised as a starsteel golem.

Chapter 1: Ynys Negesydd

1

Erika returned to her room, shooing everyone away under the pretense of wanting to get some good rest before the trip. It was only when the servants were gone that she could kick back and talk to Tirnanog.

“You don’t have to worry, Erika. I’ll be with you.”

“Thank you, Tir.”

Having spent two months together, Erika felt close enough to this monster to call him by a pet name.

“I’ll get rid of this August boy for you.”

“Hmm, I don’t think he’s the sort that needs getting rid of...”

Erika recalled the August from *Liber Monstrorum*, a frivolous prince with long, blond hair and tan skin. He never dared to develop a deep relationship with anyone, instead running away the moment someone tried to close the distance. Despite his carefree nature, he had a thick shell around his heart. He was always surrounded by one scandal or another.

“If we do end up fighting, you’ll probably be up against his Beast of Contracts.”

The Beast of Contracts was a fearsome monster that appeared in the second route of the game, the “Androphagi Archangel Incident,” where August was the focus.

This part of the story took place at the Academy of Magic in Lindis, where the Feast of the Archangel was being celebrated. In the midst of these merry festivities, a terrible incident occurred, and the vestiges of a gut-wrenching tragedy were discovered in the chapel.

An obscene amount of blood was splattered all over the scene, lending a

sinister air to the chapel's festive decorations. Within the sea of red was the left ear and three fingers of a girl and the left arm of a boy. They had been crudely severed from their bodies, like a beast had torn them off.

Those who inspected the human remains identified the victims as August and Erika. The mouth of the chapel's angel statue was left smeared with blood, as if the angel had eaten the two of them alive.

Chloe, the game's resident protagonist, was swept up in the events when she spotted the shadow of a large, one-armed beast at the crime scene. That night, she encountered Prince August, who was supposed to be dead.

What had caused this tragedy?

Motivated by his inferiority complex, August sullied his hands with the forbidden arts. He was unable to ride dragons, despite being the prince of a country of dragoons. Because of this, many decried him as an illegitimate son. Nevertheless, he continued to put in all his effort and then some. But in the end, if he couldn't ride a dragon, his labor would only reap doubts and disdain.

Once he could no longer stand the pressure, August finally committed a taboo. He revived an ancient phantasmic beast known only as the Beast of Contracts and fused with it. Although August gained the ability to ride dragons thanks to the beast's power, he had surrendered something far more valuable: his humanity.

Over the next six years, August remained stalwart; the beast, on the other hand, could no longer bear the burden placed on its imperfectly coalescent body.

Eventually, the beast split off from August. In a half-human, half-bestial form, it ambled around devouring whatever monster it came across in order to regain its power. But the creature bit off more than it could chew, losing an arm as a consequence. As it rushed to reclaim its arm and scamper back to the academy, the wounded beast came upon pitiful Erika Aurelia.

Erika was eaten alive simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and with her death, the curtains rose on the second route of *Liber Monstrorum*. However, the present Erika knew she wasn't simply an unlucky, tragic victim. After all, it was Erika herself who had triggered August's descent into darkness.

Right, she got her just desserts again. Erika let out a troubled sigh.

Just as in the first route, where she provoked Claus' little sister, Anne, into rushing to her death, in the second route, she mocked August for his failures and tore the last remnants of his pride to shreds. Her ridicule was the last push, the straw that broke the camel's back.

Erika knew she would have to be careful. She swore never to laugh at August. That was all she could do for him at the moment.

If August still reached for the forbidden regardless, she anticipated she would either have to negotiate with the Beast of Contracts or defeat it in battle. She had told her brother the wands were just for self-defense, but she had also chosen them with the idea of fighting a mighty beast in mind.

"Very well. When the time comes, I will be your shield and your spear."

"Glad to hear it. I'm counting on you. But before we think about combat, there's something I need you to do."

Erika glanced down at the five leather bags sitting on the carpet. They were each around the size of an ottoman and were reinforced with metal to make them solid and sturdy. They mostly contained clothing and shoes, among other daily necessities.

The clothes Duke Aurelia had prepared for his beloved daughter Erika were all embroidered with Paralyze magic to prevent assassination and kidnapping. If their wearer were so much as scratched, they would momentarily restrain anyone in the general vicinity. He had additionally prepared a small mountain of accessories that could redirect curses.

On top of the wands she'd received from Eduard, Erika also had a star crystal lamp that would glow whenever mana was present, an animated rope that could be controlled at will, and a number of other magic items. She had also stuffed in emergency food, water, and medicine; books that might prove useful; the tools and materials to make a golem; and whatever else she could think of.

"You see... I push and I pull, but these things just aren't going anywhere."

Each bag was not only too heavy for Erika herself, but they weighed so much that she wondered whether she could possibly ask a servant to take them on.

“Leave it to me, friend. They are no more than feathers to me.”

Before she had even finished asking, Tirnanog was already at work, hoisting up the bags and stacking them on top of one another. They were furnished with straps, so even the small golem could hold them.

“Indeed, this is nothing. I feel nothing at all,” he declared once he’d gotten a hold of three of them.

“How many do you think you can handle? Are you alright? No need to push yourself.”

“Bwahahaha, don’t make light of me.”

Erika shot Tirnanog a concerned look as he proudly puffed out his chest.

“You’ve only just revived. Don’t overexert yourself, okay?”

“How laughable! Overexert? I’m not even exerting! This much doesn’t even require a warm-up. I’ve carried whole cities before! How could this be too much for me?” said the monster who was originally the size of an island.

Tirnanog lifted a tower of all five bags, walking without the slightest difficulty.

“Bwahahahaha! Why, it’s lighter than air!”

“I’m glad you can lift them, but take care not to drop anything.”

“Who do you think you’re dealing with?!”

Now I’m perfectly prepared, Erika thought, relieved.

That being the case, the wands, books, and magic items crammed into these bags were originally her brother’s. If possible, she wanted to return them unused.

2

Duke Aurelia, then Erika, and finally a line of servants passed through the transfer gate of the Spring Palace. Their destination was a small city a short distance from Ignitia’s royal capital of Ynys Negesydd.

In the interest of national security, any direct transfers to the royal capital

were strictly prohibited—barring emergencies, of course. It would be a short carriage ride from the nearest transfer point.

The city they stopped by was lively in preparations for Adventmas. Statues of angels holding swords and eggs were erected all over town, and they were all decorated with plenty of flowers.

Adventmas was an early summer festival that merged the legend of Ignitia's Founding King with other summer celebrations already held independently in the northern and eastern parts of Ichthyes.

A slave warrior born in Ignitia—which was then but a province in the continent of Karkinos to the south—caught the eye of a single angel. The angel bestowed upon the lowly slave the power to control dragons, and with this power, he drove back the vampyres who controlled Ichthyes. Thereafter, he was crowned the Founding King of Ignitia.

Outside of Ignitia, he was also known as “the Conquering King.”

This was a heroic epic any young boy born in Ichthyes should know by heart. The angel who descended that day was the star of Adventmas and the subject of all these beautifully decorated statues.

Given the origin of the country, there were officially two regions known as Ignitia. The first was the Crown of Ignitia, which occupied the southern part of Ichthyes. The second lay across from Ynys Negesydd, a peninsula in the northeastern region of Karkinos where Ignitia was once a province of a larger power: the Karkinos-Ignitia region. When one said Ignitia, they were often referring to the former—the Crown of Ignitia governed by the king and his regents.

Ynys Negesydd was also a part of the Crown of Ignitia. Its name roughly translated to “the Isle of the Messenger.”

The Aurelian carriage proceeded down the coastland. Once they rounded the cape, leaving the flock of tall buildings behind them, the natural landscape truly unfolded.

A vivid blue sea filled Erika's entire field of vision. The waters were crystal clear, glistening under the strong light of the southern sun. The air here was

different from Aurelia's cold sea breeze; it was hot and damp as it stroked Erika's hair.

In the middle of this glittering sea stood a palace of pure white. It was an island and a city at the same time. The townscape was constructed of a uniform white stone, and all the high buildings—the palace, church, ramparts, and the like—shared a coherent design. It had been built in harmony with the towering royal palace at the center of it all, making the entire island look like a single magnificent structure.

Surrounding the white castle were a number of winged, black shadows, fluttering high in the air.

“Oh, so this is Ynys Negesydd. Quite scenic, is it not?”

“It's incredible. It's like the palace is rising up from the sea.”

Tirnanog and Erika gazed in awe from the carriage window. The royal palace was just as beautiful as they had heard. It definitely deserved its reputation as the finest sight in all of the king's territory.

A single path extended across the sea to the island. From afar, it had looked no thicker than a thread, but as they closed in, it revealed itself to be a vast and sturdy stone bridge ten meters across. The bridge's surface was always a bit slick and covered with barnacles, as it sank around twenty centimeters below sea level whenever the tide rolled in.

The carriage soon made its way over this bridge that had been underwater only a few hours ago.

Two giant dragon statues loomed over the gate. The right one was marble, and the left one was bronze polished to a golden sheen. They represented the mounts of the King of Dragoons, the famed Founding King of Ignitia. The white dragon was Urthona, and the gold dragon Tharmas.

Above Urthona were two soaring dragons the size of horses. On the backs of these mares—for when a dragon's gender was unknown, it was referred to as female—rode Ignitian dragoons in their red military uniforms.

The two dragoons waved their hands to welcome their foreign visitors, Duke Aurelia's party included. They started out so high that their outlines merged

with the sun's rays, but soon descended toward the water. The twin dragons flew level to the surface, so close that the tips of their legs skimmed the waves. When the dragons rose over the visitors once more, they kicked up a spray of mist with their forelimbs.

"A rainbow!" Erika cried out in wonder.

The dragons' paths formed an arch, a faint prismatic trail left in their wake. This was a reception exclusive to the land of dragon riders. The assortment of people from all nations who had come to take part in the Adventmas festivities waved back and cheered.

"So those are southern dragons. They're puny."

"You think so? I hear they can grow to about twenty meters."

"Is that it? They still have a long way to go."

From the perspective of a beast once the size of a mountain, practically everything was small.

Well, a dragon that can fly so freely through the open skies is captivating in its own way, Erika thought.

This was the first time she had ever seen what this world considered a common dragon.

The dragons here were all either imported or descended from dragons imported from Karkinos. They sported dinosaurian contours, slender limbs, supple yet robust hind legs, and horns that varied wildly by subspecies. However, for some reason, none of them boasted curling horns like Tirnanog's.

On top of that, the flying breeds were blessed with a set of large, bat-like wings.

Smaller dragon breeds lived around a hundred years, and they would usually spend the entirety of that time alongside humans. The larger ones' lifespans could range from three hundred to a thousand years, and after the first two hundred years, they would often leave human society. They would make the long trek to the islands that dotted the Sea of Monsters south of Ichthyes and spend the remainder of their long lives there.

The dragons of Ignitia were intelligent enough to understand human language, but as they did not possess the necessary organs to speak it, they were classified as magic beasts.

They were among the life-forms in this world that could not be classified in the same way as normal animals. These creatures stood out as they were often capable of at least one minor magical ability. Once their ecology was understood to a certain extent, or once they could be bred and raised as livestock, they were deemed magic beasts.

Monsters that exceeded the domain of magic beasts were called phantasmic beasts. The boundary between magic and phantasmic beasts was subject to heavy debate and based on the following criteria:

The monster could understand and speak human language.

The monster could manipulate a system of magic rather than possessing a single magic ability.

The monster was a member of a non-phantasmic beast species, but possessed transcendent strength as an individual.

The monster's sighting and encounter rate was so low they barely existed outside the realm of folklore.

As long as one or more of these conditions was met, a beast was often considered phantasmic. While Tirnanog shared some similarities with dragons, he was undoubtedly a phantasmic beast.

The number of dragons overhead increased even more once the carriage was inside Ynys Negesydd.

"Wow, what a scene!" Erika exclaimed, a sparkle befitting her young age in her eyes.

Dragoons holding red, blue, or green flags got into formation as they soared through the air over the city. Just as the blue-flags finished simultaneously looping the loop, the red-flags circled them, flying upside-down. The dragoons spread out to herald the appearance of a conspicuously larger dragon, which exhaled a fountain of fiery breath.

The flames bloomed into a flower, eliciting claps and cheers from the crowd. This reception was both a spectacle to entertain those visiting for Adventmas and a method to show off their military might. Ignitia had around a hundred of these trained dragoons.

It wasn't only the dragons; the town was also breathtaking and exotic. The pillars and walls were made of lovely, white crystalline limestone that could be found in abundance in the southern regions. Their buildings were all open-concept and well ventilated.

Everything in sight was decorated for Adventmas. There were red curtains emblazoned with the crest of Ignitia, angel statues dappled with flowers, handmade angel dolls, and much more. The people wore somewhat liberating and comfortable clothes ornamented with live flowers.

As Erika's carriage ambled toward the palace, it passed by various magic beasts. She saw wingless dragons the size of cows pulling carts like horses, and occasionally, cat-sized dragons perched atop the shoulders of the affluent. There were magic beasts native to Ichthyes as well as ones reared in Karkinos.

Not limited to dragons, Ignitia was home to all kinds of beast tamers. Even if they weren't dragoons, the everyman on the street could handle magic beasts; all Ignitians possessed what could be best described as a light form of telepathy.

As Erika was busy enjoying the extraordinary sights, the carriage finally passed through the palace gates. There, the Aurelians disembarked to meet with Ignitian royalty. Their attendants immediately rushed off to prepare the quarters Duke Aurelia and his household would be using.

Tirnanog, as a golem, was to stay in the carriage. Erika, still giddy, pumped herself up with renewed motivation. She would shortly have to confront the problematic Prince August.

I must take care not to blurt out anything that could be mistaken as an insult. I especially have to be careful around the festival's main attraction—the joust—where Erika mocked August in Liber Monstrorum.

Erika pulled out a hand mirror, double-checking her appearance and cleanliness.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, of course, Father! Do not worry about me.”

Thus, Erika took her first step into the palace to check on ten-year-old Prince August.

3

Duke Aurelia and Erika passed through the chamber where foreign nobles awaited their turn for an audience. They were guided straight to the private space of the Ignitian royal family.

“Why, if it isn’t Ernst! How long has it been? Welcome to Ignitia.”

As the two of them entered, a man with an affable smile spread out his arms. By the crown on his head, this could be none other than the king.

“My humblest apologies for my extended absence, Your Royal Majesty.”

“Too stiff, far too stiff. It seems you never change.”

The king of Ignitia grinned wider at Duke Aurelia’s formal address.

“Same goes for you, Erika. Just take it easy; think of this as your own home.”

“Certainly, Your Royal Majesty. Thank you for your kind consideration.”

King Henri was in his forties, but he was still an energetic man brimming with confidence and spirit. His long, pale-blond hair and hazel eyes tinted with purple were unique to the people of the south. His skin, a warm shade of cocoa, told a tale of adventure, for this man was still an active dragon rider. Either because he laughed often, or because the sunlight was so strong in these parts, his wrinkles were carved deep into his face. A silver dragon the size of a large dog sat at his feet in place of a guard.

Queen Adelaide’s blonde hair was even paler, close to platinum. Her eyes were like two transparent amethyst crystals. While beautiful enough to inspire both awe and fear, she wasn’t nearly as stiff as her appearance might suggest. Her gestures were filled with dignity and vitality. Like her husband, she had a cat-sized blue dragon resting on her shoulders.

However, the all-important First Prince August was nowhere to be found. Erika kept meek as a doll as she keenly listened in on the exchange between the friendly king and her stiff father.

The conversation occasionally touched on August's younger brother and sister—three-year-old twins—Second Prince Jules and First Princess Agnes, but August wasn't so much as alluded to.

Just let sleeping dogs lie, I guess. At least, that was the impression Erika was faintly picking up.

"Dear, you'll earn the antipathy of your people if you keep monopolizing the lovely lady," the queen politely told her husband.

"You're right. I wouldn't want a rebellion. Please, go and enjoy the festivities, you two."

By word of the king, their audience came to an end.

It's a shame I didn't get to see August, though. Still, it had been a rather bland and inoffensive meeting, which came as somewhat of a relief.

After the audience, Duke Aurelia was scheduled to discuss Adventmas matters with the ministers and other politicians. Erika was left to roam free for the time being. Her father had told her, "We don't come here often; why not go and enjoy yourself?" so she opted to do some sightseeing in the capital.



Erika purchased a guide pamphlet from a church near the palace. These booklets were copied out by an automated writing golem, and they contained a simple map of all the religious landmarks on Ynys Negesydd along with a rough description of the importance of each.

The explanations given were in picture-book format and kept concise so children and foreigners could understand. Erika had done a bit of research on Ignitia, but among the local legends in the pamphlet, there were many completely unknown to her.

For instance, the legend of Ynys Negesydd's Androphagi giants.

Once upon a time, this island was not the Isle of the Messenger; it was called

Ynys Corfflue, or the Isle of Corpses. The island was ruled by a bad giant named Cain who ate people alive. According to the legend, an envoy of the One True God defeated Cain, and the island was henceforth Ynys Negesydd.

Strangely enough, the name of the Casquetian king—whom the Founding King had once fought—was also Cain. In King Cain’s generation, Casquetia was turned into a country of vampyres, and he was called “the Mad King.” Perhaps the legends of the vampyres were mixed up with the long Giant Wars that followed.

I definitely remember seeing the name Cain in my previous life, though.

According to the character introduction page on the official website, *Liber Monstrorum* was only supposed to have seven love interests: the gloomy sadist, Claus; the flippant Prince August; the noble-turned-outlaw, Harold; the strict and scary teacher, Count Brad; the sinister smiling Eduard; the somewhat ditzy teacher, Elric; and the enigmatic Claude.

However, the people who had already beaten it had flooded the message boards with talks of “Prince Cain of the MerryBad” and “Lord Cain, the Yandere to End All Yanderes.” MerryBad was short for Merry Bad Ending, a bad ending in the game that one could argue was technically a happy ending for some people involved. Apparently, *Liber Monstrorum* had an ending where a prince and princess kissed atop a mountain of corpses.

But who exactly was he? A hidden character?

Erika frowned. He was a romance target in an otome game, so he was probably a vampyre, not a giant. Personally, she really hoped that the heroine of this world didn’t pick that route.

Well, let’s set that aside for now. Erika put her thoughts on hold and returned to reality. She had been given ample free time to wander, and it would be a waste not to use it. Her father had told her to stay on the island, but that was more than enough. Simply walking down the island streets filled her eyes with sights that could only belong to the central hub of beast tamers.

A shopkeeper taking a break out back had his pipe lit by a small salamander. The soldiers on patrol led along large dire wolves so pure white they were like masses of snow. A number of palm-sized spiders carried flowers for the workers

decorating the eaves of the houses.

Among all of this, Erika and her metallic golem were terribly conspicuous. The townsfolk frequently stole glances at this foreign girl and her porter.

Erika whispered to Tirnanog in a low voice so as not to arouse suspicion.

“It’s like an adventure. I’m feeling giddy, Tir.”

“Ever since I revived, everything I’ve seen has been so curious and interesting.”

Thankfully, it seemed Tirnanog was also enjoying taking in all the unfamiliar sights.

“Glad to hear it. Let’s see, then... How about we stop by the Grand Cathedral?”

Ynys Negesydd was famed for its many religious constructions: the Grand Cathedral and chapel, charnel house, spire, and monastery. All of these were perfect for sightseeing. With that on her mind, Erika set off to see them one by one.

4

Ignitia was the nation that brought monotheism to the united kingdoms, and it was consequently where one would find the most churches and cathedrals. That being said, theirs was not a strict or intolerant religion.

Because Ignitia had once been part of a now-fallen empire on the continent of Karkinos, it had learned a number of lessons from its empiric rulers, including how to bring together people of different races with patience and leniency. Once Ignitia’s monarchy was in control of Ichthyes, it readily put religious freedom and tolerance into practice.

By syncretizing foreign gods with their own, sometimes taking them in as saints and angels, they assimilated the local religions. No local religious practices or beliefs were completely overwritten, which brought about the current state of affairs.

Lucanlandt’s ancestral god Holle became St. Horatius. Hafan’s chief god was rebranded as another aspect of the One True God, while the others became

angels and spirits. Aurelia's Brean became St. Breandán.

An abundance of old gods from Karkinos still lingered, albeit not in their original forms. The Grand Cathedral was a shining symbol of the unity of cultures, ethnicities, and deities.

It's still pretty strange, all things considered.

Erika felt something was off as she walked through the cathedral. The religion did not prohibit idolatry, but there was not a single representation of God to be found. Instead, the sanctuary was filled with all manner of pagan cryptids and mythical beasts.

There were reliefs of centaurs, who had the upper bodies of humans but were horses from the waist down. One mural depicted a hominid with four heads and a mouth on their stomach. A chalice was engraved with a one-eyed, one-legged monster. In one area stood the statue of a goddess with more than ten nipples.

Even the angel borrowed its design from a different god from the southern continent.

"Quite a mishmash."

"Apparently, this used to be the royal palace. They kept on adding more and more to the existing structure, which is why the layout is so complicated. Also, the scriptures are only allowed to be copied in the language of the old empire. There are many people who can't read them, and the decorations are meant as a visual representation of the texts for them."

If one took the standard route through the Grand Cathedral, the images would tell the whole story of the gospel. Going off the path allowed one to follow each of the individual stories that were later incorporated into the faith.

Erika only knew the sacred texts as far as her father and brother had recited them to her, so seeing them in this form was quite a new and invigorating experience.

After pressing through the Grand Cathedral a while, they eventually reached a chamber decorated with ample amounts of gold. What's more, there seemed to be something familiar about the story its murals depicted.

Wait... Isn't that...?

Before her eyes, a saint was being swallowed by a giant, twin-horned creature.

"Tir, what do you think about that painting?"

"Hey! That's me!"

The black monster cried out for joy from within the metal golem.

"Yeah, I knew that had to be you."

"Heh heh heh! So the barbarians of the south revere me as well! Splendid!"

"Yeah, I'm not so sure about that."

Erika tilted her head. These murals were most likely made by an Aurelian who was called upon for the construction of the cathedral. It wasn't just the one she was looking at; the surrounding paintings also featured a black beast.

One story told of how a ship carrying a saint had mistaken a beast for an island, and its passengers had disembarked on its great body. Another illustrated people surviving a divine flood from atop a horned giant's back. These sorts of tales were common all throughout the world, but what was depicted here was neither a whale nor a turtle, as one might expect. It was always a black monster.

Well, what do you know. This guy's surprisingly beloved.

Erika felt a warmth in her chest. Perhaps the Seafaring Tribe had always held him dear, even if his true story had to be covered up due to a sinister event.

"Have you taken a liking to that painting?"

"Indeed. The horns are shaped wonderfully. The artist was someone who really understood my mystique."

"That's nice."

"Hmm, don't mind me. Feel free to look around. I can generally tell where you are by scent. I'm going to enjoy my paintings a bit more."

"Really? Then I'll go right ahead."

Tirnanog seemed quite busy, leaning in to appreciate the painting up close, so Erika left him and walked on. Just a little further down, she was immersed in the faith of the south, which she could only ever see in Ignitia.

From what I can see, it definitely didn't start out monotheistic.

All around her were flocks of monsters like the Hyakki Yagyo—a procession of supernatural creatures from Japanese folklore. There were also depictions of a saint's history of suffering and martyrdom, as well as a hero with an angel, a dragon, and other bizarre beasts that aided his quest. Rather than the hero and saint, however, the images here placed a far greater significance on the monsters.

As Erika was staring at a line of pillars chiseled into the shapes of strange creatures, she heard a voice from behind her.

“Oh, that's rare. I'm usually the only one who browses this area.”

When she turned around, she saw someone walking through the wide palette of light cast through the stained glass. Silky, blond hair that glimmered in the sun's rays, cut just barely above the shoulders. Clear, purple eyes like two shining amethysts. Pale, white skin that could never have seen a day in the sun sported a pair of healthy, rosy cheeks. High, noble features. A small, golden dragon on the shoulder.



The people of Ignitia were notoriously beautiful, and Erika felt this person was especially so.

This kid is pretty, sure, but are they a boy or girl? I could honestly see it going either way.

Their build and features were androgynous. However, going by the white shirt and black bow tie, the black trousers, and the long boots, this was probably a boy.

“Who are you?” Erika asked him.

“Hmm, you don’t know me?”

The boy’s expression softened as a gentle smile befitting his age crossed his face. Pearly white teeth peeked out through his elegant lips.

Erika frowned when she noticed her question had been ignored. He was definitely a captivating pretty boy, but was he really that famous? Was he the son of some noble or a child actor in some famous troupe?

“That’s convenient,” said the boy as he stroked the golden dragon. Even his fingernails were neat and tidy.

“What are you talking about? Why would that be convenient?”

“Oh, just talking to myself. It’s nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.”

Despite her suspicions, Erika refrained from prying any further. Everyone had things they would rather not come to light. She herself had a mountain of matters she would rather keep to herself. That being the case, it would be inconvenient not to be able to address him, so she rephrased the question.

“My name is Erika. And whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

“Woe is me; I let a lady give her name first. Allow me to apologize for my discourtesy. I’m the son of the one in charge here, and I go by Angel around these parts.”

He seriously just called himself an angel?

She might have burst into laughter under normal circumstances, but she instead found herself accepting it rather easily. If he was the son of the one in

charge here—the priest, that is—it would not be unusual if his name really was Angel.

“So, Erika. Where did you come from, and why are you here?”

“I’ve only just arrived from the west and... well, I’m in the middle of sightseeing.”

“Does that mean you’re an alchemist? Was that lively doll I saw over yonder one of your golems?”

“Yes, that’s right. He’s one of mine.”

“Hmm, that’s incredible. You’re still so tiny, yet you can control one of those?”

“Just barely.”

Erika nonchalantly stacked lie over lie while keeping a completely straight face.

“What’s wrong, Erika? Is there trouble afoot?”

Tirnanog approached her with cautious steps. Erika was impressed that he could close the gap between them immediately.

“You can’t attack him. This boy’s the son of the minister. He’s safe, for now.”

“I see. Such a shame.”

“And calm down a bit, would you?”

“Very well. Leave it to me. I am always calm and composed.”

As Tirnanog proudly puffed out his chest, the boy hoisted him up and began observing him curiously. The golden dragon also stared suspiciously at what lay beyond the starsteel helmet.

“Are golems supposed to move this naturally? Oh, Goldberry, it’s bothering you too? Now, what makes you tick? Hm? Isn’t there something inside—”

Before the boy could finish, Erika hurriedly raised her voice.

“While I hail from Aurelia, I’m terrible at most fields of alchemy. I just can’t seem to convert my mana well. With golem making, I can physically carve the

symbols directly on the metal, so I can just barely pull it off.”

“I see. So this is the product of never giving up, even if you didn’t have the aptitude. You sure are a hard worker.”

“Please don’t stare at him so hard. It’s embarrassing. You’ll start to see my shoddy craftsmanship.”

Erika had whipped up a lie to top off her sincerity. It was true that she could only make golems, but the issue at hand was something else entirely.

“Well, I don’t know too much about golems, but isn’t he nicely done?”

The boy glanced between Erika and Tirnanog, a rather meek look on his face.

His innocence is driving a stake into my heart, thought Erika. Unable to bear his gaze any longer, she quickly moved to change the subject.

“Hey, do you have any recommendations for the Grand Cathedral? If there’s any place I shouldn’t miss, I’d really like to know,” she said while casually rescuing Tirnanog from the boy’s arms.

“Let’s see. You *did* show me something interesting, so I guess I have to return the favor. How about a place prohibited to unauthorized personnel?”

“Is that... okay?”

“Oh, they’ll throw a fit if they find us there. So it’ll be our little secret.” The boy offered a theatrical wink. “If you’re a fan of these creepy places, only one thing comes to mind. Why, you’d be hard-pressed to find a rarer or queerer specimen. Shall we be off?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll follow your lead.”

Erika felt quite fortunate to have obtained such a kind and beautiful tour guide.

Maybe my luck is finally turning around.

Thus, Erika let the boy who called himself Angel guide her around the Grand Cathedral.

The self-proclaimed Angel led Erika by the hand deeper and deeper into the Grand Cathedral. Tirnanog followed behind them, carrying two rather large pieces of luggage.

As for Erika's smaller leather purse, however, the boy had courteously offered to carry it for her.

He sure knows his manners.

Erika stealthily eyed the boy leading her along. Despite his slender build, his arms boasted a firm musculature. He was so obviously well trained that it went against his claim of being a clergyman's son.

Their way was regularly dotted with locked doors, which the boy would bypass with no difficulty whatsoever. His path was straight and clear. He had with him not a bundle of keys, but a single skeleton key that seemed to work nearly anywhere in the Grand Cathedral.

"Is there any reason it's this far out of the way?"

"Yes, it's only exhibited a few times a year."

"Must be pretty exclusive, then."

"You could say that. But I'm special, so I can see it whenever I want."

"Neat."

From her past life, Erika recalled a precious Buddha statue that would only be displayed once every few years. Surely this mural the boy spoke of was something similar.

This is somewhat exciting.

The paintings and carvings grew more and more monstrous beyond each door. Surreal, nightmarish images sent just the right sort of chill down her spine. This was an itch seldom scratched.

It's scary but even more enthralling! So enthralling, in fact, that Erika could relish in these hordes of painted monsters without any fear.

"I'm glad you're having fun, but the best is yet to come. We're headed to the room farthest in the back."

“The deepest depths of the Grand Cathedral?”

Erika recalled what terrible misfortune had befallen her the last time she reached the innermost chamber of an ancient structure. It was a good memory in hindsight, but the idea still stirred up a bit of trauma.

When she glanced back, Tirnanog cheerfully waved.

The source of my trauma's an ally now. I should be fine. She waved back.

“Thank you for waiting. I’ve saved the best for last,” said the boy as he pushed open the final and bombastically ornamented door.

What opened up before her was a vast room with barely any decoration at all. The back wall opposite the doorway did not belong. It was a painted slab of limestone that must have been cut out and removed from somewhere else.

Erika shivered. The dread hit her before she could even make sense of the image.

“That fine gentleman you see is our Lord. Our one and only God in the world.” The boy pointed at the painted stone slab.

The limestone wall did indeed depict the One True God, emphasizing his role as Lord of the Sun. There were vibrant shades of vermillion, black, white, and gold. The sun was set in the top center with humans and all of God’s other creatures painted below to equally share in his love and warmth.

Countless hands grew from the sun. There were so many slender arms of light, they somehow came off as sinister. Each and every one of them reached out to stroke the head of a creature on the earth below. There were seven eyes in the sun, and each hand contained its own eye.

This powerful, elaborate mural gave off a ghastly impression, overwhelming its viewer. It was overflowing with an uncanny strength, and it was definitely not the sort of painting that would awaken anyone to religion.

“It was apparently taken from an altar on a holy site in the southern continent. Doesn’t it just make you retch?”

“I’ll admit it’s creepy. And pretty scary too.”

“Sure is. It’s too bizarre. It wouldn’t be convenient if we made our believers

fearful or disillusioned. That's why it usually doesn't see the light of day."

Erika couldn't take her eyes off this representation of God. She was beginning to feel it had a certain kind of beauty in and of itself.

Soaring between God and man were numerous heavenly servants. There were four large, presumably more significant ones, while the others were smaller.

These four seemed to be the archangels, but each of them boasted the head of a beast.

"Are those... angels?"

"Yeah, that's right. They're quite warped, aren't they?"

Outside of this room, every painting and sculpture Erika had seen depicted angels with beautiful human faces. The discrepancy perplexed her. Indeed, the angels on this restricted art piece were more like the gods of Ancient Egypt.

The angel stationed closest to God seemed to receive special treatment, as they looked especially extravagant. They were conspicuously larger than the rest and colored with copious amounts of valuable gold and cinnabar. This angel had the head of a lion, six wings, and a burly body. There was a sword of flame in their left hand, a medicine vial in their right.

Besides the leonine angel in their red robe, there were three slightly lesser archangels: one with a cow's head, one with the head of a bird, and one whose head was smeared out in red paint.

The epic fresco of an uncanny God and his uncanny angels had Erika at a loss for words. She looked up at it, her mouth half open, and after inspecting it up close, she slowly stepped back to take it in as a whole.

All of a sudden, she bumped into something soft.

"Oh my, to bring a girl *here* of all places... What a naughty boy you are."

From behind her came the coarse, saccharine voice of a woman.

"Curses. The irksome one found us."

The boy frowned at the individual, a fed-up look on his face and a hand on his

brow. Erika turned to follow his line of sight and came face to face with an unfamiliar beauty.

This stranger had stern yet captivating eyes, and her abundant blonde hair was bound high up on her head. Her red dress was very revealing—a staple of the south—and her suntanned, voluptuous chest was nearly bursting out. There were gold ornaments all over her body, so dazzlingly gaudy it hurt to look.

“I’m irksome, you say? My, my, big words coming from a pup who hasn’t even grown his fur coat.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” the boy said sulkily. A laugh rumbled from deep within the woman’s throat.

“You know her, Mr. Angel?”

“Yes, this is... How to explain?”

The boy hesitated for a moment. Judging by the look on his face, that was not a question he wanted to answer.

“Mr. Angel? Hmm? You’re Mr. Angel now? Not bad at all. You really are an *angel*.”

“Bleh... I’d appreciate it if you kept a lid on it.”

He took Erika by the hand, pulling her away from the grinning woman giving an enthralled laugh.

“Unnecessary? Me? Mmhahaha, have I ever said an unnecessary word in my life?”

“Sure you have. You just said a bunch.”

“How cruel. I take it you have a thing for younger girls then, Mr. Angel?”

The lady seemed to relish in provoking the boy.

“Umm...” The conversation had completely left her behind, so Erika timidly asserted her presence.

“Ahem, sorry about that. She’s a friend of mine. Also, I can’t say this publicly, but she lives in the cathedral. She won’t tattle on us, don’t worry.”

“I see.”

Erika interpreted this as meaning the woman was in a precarious situation he would rather not talk about. Perhaps she was the mistress of a high-ranking clergyman or a noble who was being sheltered due to extenuating circumstances.

“Oh dear, look at what you did. Now she knows I’m not scary. That takes all the fun out of my introduction, doesn’t it?”

“What were you planning to say to her?”

“Why, if you’re the angel, then I’m the devil. How’s that sound?”

“Not clever, and not fun. Pretty trite, I’d say.”

The woman raised her arms menacingly as an adult might do to playfully spook a child. The boy ignored her, looking increasingly sicker of her antics by the second.

“Did I hear that right? Are you sure I’m not scary?”

“Yes, yes. You’re very scary, I assure you, so give it a rest.”

“I’m terrified,” added Erika.

Without much of an option, the two children pretended to cower. The woman nodded a few times, satisfied.

“Mmhmm. A wise choice. All of God’s creatures that live and that shall ever live must fear me as a matter of course.”

The woman seemed as giddy as a child as she spun on the spot.

“Good grief. What am I to do with you?” sighed the boy. Despite his clear annoyance, he still watched over her warmly.

The next moment, the chime of the evening bell reverberated through the Grand Cathedral.

“Oh, it’s already this late,” he said. “Little ladies like yourself should be getting on home.”

“Aw, what a shame. It was so lively for once.”

“Playtime’s over. We can’t hold up such a young child for too long, you know?” He turned to his strange companion. “Isn’t it about time for us to return

too?”

Erika recalled how she had been invited to the royal family’s own Adventmas feast. Nobles would gather from all over the land, and those in attendance would have to dress themselves up considerably. It would take some time to prepare.

“Thank you so much for today. I’ll come over again tomorrow if I have the free time.”

“See you later, kiddo. Next time, how about I show you around the underground crypt?”

“The crypt? We’re showing a young girl around, and *that’s* the place you want to take her? Seriously, you’re too much.”

“Oh, really now? This is quite a room to be showing a girl too.”

“See you later, Erika. I’ll pick a more decent place to show you next time!”

The boy and woman smiled and waved their hands.

I get the feeling these two are experts when it comes to religious sites.

As far as Erika was concerned, a local tour guide was exactly what she needed, but she knew she couldn’t be too selfish. Once she left the Grand Cathedral and found somewhere relatively deserted, she whispered into Tirnanog’s ear.

“Thank you for keeping quiet for so long, Tir.”

“It was an easy job. I could have done it in my sleep. Plus, I wasn’t completely uninterested.”

By the time her sightseeing trip was over, it was already evening. The crimson sun was in the process of being swallowed by the horizon. With festivities at their peak, the streets were still crowded even at this time of day. The air was filled with the distinct, mouthwatering smells of dinner preparations.

If I start eating now, I’ll have trouble putting on the dress.

As Erika mulled over this troublesome dilemma, Tirnanog tugged on the hem of her skirt.

“You mustn’t let them deceive you, Erika.”

“Hm? About what?”

“The man is no angel, and the woman is far from a devil.”

“Yes, I picked up on that. I’ll be fine.”

“I see. Very good. You are a clever girl, Erika.”

Erika couldn’t quite understand the intent behind Tirnanog’s peculiar warning, but his statement seemed so self-evident that she let it slide by without any further thought.

She walked out into the lively city streets and returned to the villa reserved for Duke Aurelia.

6

The Adventmas banquet was held in the vast Lion Hall. The palace itself was enormous, and its reception hall spanned a great distance from end to end. As the name implied, the pillars and walls were carved in the likeness of lions.

Large tables stood proudly in the extravagant hall, bedecked with festive decorations and perfectly prepared for the feast. It was lit by the dozens of candles hanging on the large chandelier. They were presumably beeswax candles, as they filled the room with a faintly sweet scent.

Under their flickering warm light sat rows upon rows of nobles from all across the land. Ignitia’s royals and nobles sat with small dragons either crawling on their shoulders or skulking around their ankles. To these southern nobles, the smaller breeds not only served as a measure of self-defense but also a living display of wealth.

Lucanlandt’s nobles had large, ceremonial swords hung at their hips. Hafan’s came with their staves and robes. While Aurelia’s finest only carried a few wands apiece, they wore an excess of gaudy ornaments. Where else would they be able to flaunt them?

As Erika looked around Lion Hall, she realized something was off. For some reason, there were a conspicuous number of vacant seats among the Hafan

nobles. There were many women and barely any men.

Was there something that required their attention? Erika wondered as she whispered to Duke Aurelia.

“Father, did something happen to the Hafans?”

“Apparently, several old graves were dug up all at once. A number of skilled magicians were sent to investigate and take care of it. No need to worry. Hafan nobles are experts when it comes to these sorts of incidents. They’ll solve it soon enough.” Duke Aurelia gently stroked Erika’s head.

“Could it be that they were graves from the Casquetian era?”

Erika carelessly blurted out information she’d once nicked with a glance at her brother’s documents. Lately, there had been repeated desecrations of graves from the days of vampyre rule.

“I don’t know about that, Erika... but you should take care not to say that word at a banquet.”

“My apologies, Father.” Erika hurriedly covered her mouth.

Casquetia was quite a touchy subject. Hafan and Lucanlandt shared an extreme, almost excessive hatred of them. Understandable, though, as back when Casquetia still existed, the other two nations were forced into a long and dark period of servitude. The people of Aurelia had only arrived at the continent after Ignitia destroyed Casquetia, so they were outsiders to the vampyre conflict.

If Casquetia was involved, then even if there wasn’t anything mysterious about the incident, House Hafan would personally handle the matter. Duke Hafan and Claus probably wouldn’t make it to the capital until this grave destruction was resolved.

From afar, Erika could make out the duchess, but couldn’t see Claus or Anne. She was quite looking forward to meeting Anne again, though she would rather avoid Claus. The reason being, after that incident in the Seafarer’s Ruins, he sent her a letter essentially challenging her to a duel.

What even was that letter?

She couldn't begin to comprehend Claus' intentions and hoped she never had to. But just as she thought this, Duke Aurelia cut in with the words she least expected.

"Are you feeling lonely knowing you won't be able to meet Claus?"

Why is Claus' name coming up? Erika found this quite strange. She didn't know a thing about the talks of engagement between herself and the heir to Duke Hafan, and thus answered coldly and indifferently.

"No, not in particular. I'm perfectly fine."

"I see. Seems like I got ahead of myself. Please, just forget about it." Duke Aurelia looked somewhat downtrodden, but Erika failed to grasp her father's intentions.

While father and daughter conversed, the court orchestra began playing a tune. The maids and chefs matched the tempo as they brought out silver platters laden with food. Seeing the prismatic arrays of sweets, the noble children from all over raised cheers of joy.

"Erika, at the Adventmas feast, you simply drink all you want, eat all you want, and have fun. You can enjoy a nice chat, or you can sing and dance. Don't let their grandiose reception put you off; it's a festival just like any other. This should be good practice before you enter high society. Don't be shy; dip your toes in and get used to it little by little."

"Certainly, Father."

It was at that moment that a pastry chef arrived, carrying a pure-white sugar candy on a meter-wide silver platter. The candy had been sculpted into the shape of Ynys Negesydd with exquisite detail.

As Erika's eyes were taken by the radiant sugar palace, she was greeted by an abrupt tap on the leg. Tirnanog peeked his head out from beneath the tablecloth, his eyes dead set on the candy curiosity.

"What is that, Erika? It's a building, yet it gives off such a sweet scent."

"That's a festive sweet made for the holiday season. I hear they make things like that for special occasions."

“Splendid. I would like to have a taste.”

“I’ll nick some for you when I see an opportunity,” Erika answered with a smile. Showing gratitude to Tirnanog for carrying around so many heavy bags all day was a task that surely required mountains of food.

“Erika, we must start by paying respects to His Majesty.”

“I know my common courtesies, Father.”

Erika accompanied Duke Aurelia to the foot of the king. She glanced back to see Tirnanog waving from under the table, crunching down on a large lobster with the shell still on.

This time, upon arriving before royalty, Erika noted that the princes were present as well.

Looks like I can finally get a good look at August’s face. She felt a sliver of relief as she closely took in the visage of this scandalous prince.

August, Crown Prince of Ignitia, wore a ceremonial uniform that was rouge red with gold ornamentation. A small, golden dragon rested on his shoulder. Silky blond hair spilled out in abundance from his head; its shade seemed a bit stronger compared to the rest of the royal line. His skin was ghastly pale.

It was hard to believe what she saw—it would take only a matter of six years to turn this youth into a frivolous playboy. The boy before her eyes was petite and delicate, almost like a fairy-tale princess.

Err, wait, don’t I know him?

Erika’s eyes nearly popped out of her skull. His expression had changed so much that her mind had failed to register it, but as she gradually took note of his features, she realized he was the same boy who had shown her around the cathedral. What’s more, the dragon on his shoulder was most definitely Goldberry.

While August greeted Erika and her father, he did not even attempt to look them in the eye. His brow remained frozen in place, his eyes set somewhere far in the distance. He bore no resemblance to that sociable and expressive boy she’d met at midday. This boy was like a statue of alabaster.

It took a while of Erika rudely staring at him before August stole an ice-cold glare at her. After silently scanning her once, he returned his eyes to greener pastures. He was either terribly apathetic or completely uninterested.

Goldberry, however, stared back. After narrowing her eyes in what seemed to be a smile, she tugged on her master's hair to try to get him to look at Erika again. But August's face remained set in stone.

While he was quite clearly ignoring her, Erika found she could bear it no longer, and finally spoke up.

"Your Highness? Err, pardon my discourtesy, but is that you, Mr. Angel?"

It was only after the words had left her lips that she realized how out of place they had been.

Why am I hitting on him?! No, but how else am I supposed to ask?

Before she could smooth things over, her father and the king, who were exchanging a drink, both nervously gulped.

Why do you two look so interested? Please, it's not what you think.

Erika turned red to the ears in embarrassment. By this point, she realized she should have asked, "Were you the boy who showed me around the Grand Cathedral?" but it was already too late.

"My, did you hear that, August? She called you an angel."

The queen happily smiled, having taken it as a compliment, and gave the boy a nudge. While this meant August was forced to look at Erika, his expression was still as cold as ever.

"Yes, it seems my beauty has made Lady Erika mistake me for an angel. But I am just as human as any other. I can't take off to the sky." August paused, stood, and bowed. "As a human burdened by my earthly form, I cannot say I am always in the best of health. There are inevitably many things beyond my control. I am feeling somewhat under the weather, so I shall be taking my leave for the night. Lady Erika, please excuse my impoliteness."

He rambled on in an inorganic tone completely different from the boy she remembered. "Don't mind me. Continue to enjoy the feast."

After declaring this without so much as a twitch of the brow, he turned on his heel and walked off.

What's this all about? Does he have a split personality or something?

Questions continued to circle around and around in Erika's head. All the while, the queen passionately apologized on behalf of her son.

7

Confused and restless, Erika excused herself early from the royals' table. She was now caught up in scouring the tables for food, a plate in one hand.

As she made her rounds, she gave her obligatory greetings while smacking her lips. Before she knew it, she had found fellow travelers: Tricia, daughter of the baron Lord Rails of Aurelia, and Marquia, daughter of the Ignitian viscount Lord Jonas. They were both eight years old, the same as Erika.

"Lady Erika, do take care not to sully your hands. Use my handkerchief, by all means," Tricia said while holding out a finely embroidered cloth.

"Lady Erika, I highly recommend this sweet. This unique sugar candy has grown frightfully popular among Ignitia's noblewomen," said Marquia as she presented a glistening gumdrop.

"Lady Erika is an Aurelian noble like me. Should I not be the one to instruct her?"

"But we are in *Ignitia*. It only makes sense for an Ignitian to guide the way."

Driven by a childish impulse to monopolize, Tricia and Marquia bickered over Erika like they had found a beautiful doll, ultimately growing completely engrossed more in their spat than in her.

Personally, I find that girlish behavior adorable. Erika was calmly watching over the two when, all of a sudden, Tirnanog popped his head out from under the tablecloth. Erika deftly swapped out the heaping plate in her hand with his empty one.

"Take care not to be seen."

“Worry not. Despite my appearance, I am light on my feet.”

When the quarrel was over and Tricia and Marquia returned, Tirnanog vanished under the tablecloth in the blink of an eye.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Lady Erika. Marquia was being so terribly stubborn.”

“Oh dear, you’ve already forgotten what happened just seconds ago? It was Tricia who sounded so frightfully silly.”

“Yes, yes. I’m not going anywhere. No need to worry.”

As Erika was rendered immobile by the two adorable ladies clasping her from both sides, a terribly conspicuous girl stepped out from the party of Hafan nobles. Her name was Anne, and she was the daughter of Duke Hafan. Erika was quite certain she hadn’t been there last she checked.

Anne wore a cute, salmon dress. The dress was quite intricate, with embedded gems, fine embroidery, and elegant lace. It was a perfect match for her corsage of light-crimson flowers. Her features somehow seemed a little more mature than they had been two months prior, giving off glimpses of the sharp, refreshing beauty she would surely grow to be.

“It has been far too long, Erika dearest. I’ve been dying to meet you.”

“Oh, hello, Anne. I’m glad I got to see you so soon.”

Erika softly smiled, and Anne returned a sharp grin. Picking up on their intimacy, Tricia and Marquia were quick to shift the target of their youthful jealousy; they directed a look of concealed hostility at this newcomer.

However, Anne accepted the two noble ladies with open arms.

“A crest of three sailing ships over four waves. You must be the daughter of Lord Rails.”

“Correct, I am Tricia Rails. But why do you know our family crest?”

“A sleeping white dragon and crossed swords. Might you be the daughter of Lord Jonas?”

“I am certainly Marquia Jonas. Rather rude of you to toss out our names

before giving your own, though.”

Anne casually removed her hands from the Hafan crest she had covered up.

“My humblest apologies. I am Anne of House Hafan. Tricia, Marquia, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Her voice was terribly well enunciated for a child, her curtsy picture perfect.

Tricia and Marquia froze for a moment, their mouths half open, only to abruptly stumble into a deep, respectful bow.

“I cannot believe I treated a lady of House Hafan with such rudeness!”

“You humble me with the audience you have so graciously granted us!”

“Why, if you show such humility, it almost makes it seem like I’m bullying you. Ladies, please, lift your faces.” Seeing that the girls had completely changed their tone, Anne gently continued, “It’s true that I intruded on your conversation, so doesn’t that make us even? We are all comrades in our appreciation of dear Erika. Let bygones be bygones, and let’s get to know one another as equals. Okay?”

“Y-Yes, of course!”

“It is an honor!”

As Anne calmly stepped toward Erika, Tricia and Marquia backed off to give her space. Despite declaring them equals, Anne had firmly and successfully drilled in the pecking order. She nestled up close to Erika and looked up at her with warm eyes.

“You can’t imagine how much I’ve missed you, Erika dearest.”

“Thanks, I missed you too. Our schedules just never seem to match up.”

“Come to think of it, did you get my present?”

“I did, and it was delicious.”

“I was sure you’d love it. If you come to Hafan, you can feast on delicious meat every day!”

“That sounds wonderful. I’ll be counting on you to show me the ropes next time I stop by.”

Erika found herself enjoying a long-awaited conversation with this calm, reserved girl more than she thought she would. The two of them exchanged idle banter a bit longer, when all of a sudden, Erika recalled a certain threatening letter she received from Claus. These opportunities did not come often, so she knew she simply had to ask.

“Oh, by the way, about Claus...”

“You want to know about my brother? Feel free to ask me anything you want.”

“I received a peculiar letter from him. Did I... perhaps do something that might’ve made him angry? Or maybe something that lit up his fighting spirit?”

“A peculiar... letter? When did that arrive?” A deep wrinkle crossed Anne’s brow.

“It was enclosed along with your present.”

“With the... No, no matter how stupid he is, he couldn’t possibly have—do you mind me asking what it said?”

“You are strong. I will become a man who won’t lose to you. Please wait for me. End quote.”

“He wrote *what?!?*!”

Anne nearly fainted, as if she had been assailed by a sudden bout of anemia. She was smacked right in the face by the fact that not only had her brother failed to send the love letter she had thoroughly corrected, but he had also sent something completely different in order to bypass her censorship.

“Umm... That was a challenge, wasn’t it?”

“Most definitely not. If I may be so bold, I presume that letter had a completely different purpose. It may have looked like a challenge because he could not find the right words, but it is most certainly nothing of the sort. I beg of you, please believe in my brother. Please, give him just one more chance.”

Erika breathed a sigh of relief. While Anne’s attitude was a bit unnerving, she couldn’t be more thankful if it was all just a misunderstanding.

“That’s great. I want to get along with Claus. I’ll gladly accept a rewrite.”

As Erika and Anne conversed, a shrill cry rose from somewhere too close for comfort. The sound belonged to Tricia and Marquia, who had stayed relatively quiet until now.

“Who is that dashing boy?!”

“He’s like a prince from a fairy tale!”

The two were considerably worked up. And they weren’t the only ones; many girls and even older women seemed to be entranced by a single young boy.

The boy turned toward Erika. He had black hair above melancholic blue eyes that looked prone to being downcast. He was none other than the magician Claus Hafan.

While Claus looked quite plain at first glance, his outfit was actually rather elaborate. His robe—just a shade shy of black—was a lustrous, luxurious, woolen fabric hemmed with silver thread. A first-class article. His brooch and cufflinks exhibited admirable workmanship and had a silver moon as a motif. Even though so much work had clearly gone into it, the outfit itself did not particularly stand out. It seemed that Claus was partial to intricate clothing downplayed by a subdued color scheme.

Hey, I might be squealing right along with them if I didn’t know what goes on inside his head, Erika thought, averting her eyes.

“He seems around the same age as us, but I never knew there was such a lovely gentleman out there! My heart is racing! Oh, is this a dream?!”

“Wh-What shall we do, Lady Erika?! He’s coming our way!”

“Good question. What should we do?” Erika halfheartedly replied as Tricia and Marquia firmly clutched her sides.

I get that the challenge was a misunderstanding, but I would still rather avoid him.

Claus was right in front of her before she had finished mulling over the matter. When he gave her a stiff smile, she sent back a surface-level one of her own.

“Hello, Lady Erika.”

“It has been some time, Lord Claus.”

“You’ve grown more beautiful since the last time I saw you. It was worth it to make the long trek to Ignitia.”

“And in the time since I last saw you, your character has fallen apart—pardon me, I mean, your personality has changed considerably.”

“Harsh words. Does it not suit me?”

Claus’ smile came naturally this time, and so did Erika’s. The next instant, Claus defied all her expectations. He kneeled before her and took her hand, like he was a knight and she his lady.



Huh? What is it now?!

Tricia's and Marquia's shrill squeals of glee filled the air in place of Erika's silent scream.

"Erika. Would you grant me the honor of the first dance?"

As Erika's eyes wandered in a panic, she was met full-force by a proud smirk from Anne.

Wait, don't tell me, this is...

Despite his orderly appearance, Claus was practically a bucking bronco inside. Determining it was too dangerous to serve him in front of strangers, Anne had selected her as the poison tester; or at least, that's what Erika concluded. And if that was the reason, she wasn't completely against dancing with Claus.

"Of course, Claus. I'll gladly take you up on that offer."

Erika acted out the gestures of a noble lady, pinching the hem of her dress in a curtsy. Once again, Tricia and Marquia shrieked while the eyes and ears of the surrounding adults grew increasingly fixed on the two of them.

What do I do? This is getting pretty embarrassing.

Erika found herself lost for a moment, but she knew she would have to endure something similar to this when she eventually made her debut in high society.

Claus seemed quite embarrassed himself, and as he stared at Erika, he turned red to the ears. His movements had become somewhat jerky.

"Let's get moving, Erika."

"You're reverting back to normal, Claus."

"Shut it."

Pulling Erika by the hand, Claus scurried onto the dance floor.

8

Claus tugged Erika step by step to the center of the floor. Their status as

dukes' children garnered them an unnecessary surplus of spectators.

Erika found herself overly conscious of these prying eyes; she was frozen stiff and feeling even more dissociated than usual. Claus picked up on this and raised an eyebrow.

"What, are you nervous?"

"You're not? I never would have guessed. I mean, you're pretty red."

"Humph. It's just the lighting."

The two spoke in hushed whispers, taking each other by the hand.

Erika carried her feet earnestly, one at a time, exerting her utmost efforts to avoid stepping on Claus' toes, or anyone else's for that matter. Claus, meanwhile, compensated for her precarious footing with skillful improvisation.

"You're a good dancer, Claus."

"Anne hammered it into me... Quit looking at your feet. That just makes it easier to trip."

"Ah, got it."

Erika decided she would just leave it to Claus. It would be a huge load off her mind if he kept taking the lead. While she wasn't entirely new to dancing, it was definitely not her strong suit.

"Don't look down. Look at me."

"As you wish."

Erika stared hard at Claus. Her long eyebrows, her emerald eyes, her little slope of a nose, her lips... Once Claus' gaze traced down to her nape, he reddened once more.

"You're overdoing it; now your face is too close. Never mind, don't look at me. Just look over my shoulder or something."

"That's quite a tall order."

"For now, just trust me, and follow my lead. I won't let you embarrass yourself."

He was a skilled enough dancer to lend weight to these words. Erika relaxed, letting herself enjoy the music, and before she knew it, she had danced through a whole song without incident.

If he's this good, he should be fine dancing with other girls too.

Knowing her job was now over, Erika gave a bow and tried to make her escape, only for Claus to grab her by the arm.

"A little more wouldn't hurt."

The next song had already begun. Erika reluctantly moved her body to match his.

"Claus, shouldn't you dance with other people too?"

"I came here to see you. Why should I dance with some other woman?"

"You're the son of a duke, are you not? Isn't deepening connections with other houses part of the job?"

"The son of Duke Hafan is on break." Claus closed in on Erika's ear, continuing in a whisper, "I can't say it out loud, but I'm currently investigating a case by royal decree. Our team's leader is an incredibly harsh taskmaster. I had to beg that inhuman wretch to let me come here. This is my valuable free time, and I'm not gonna waste it."

Despite his age, Claus had received an order from the king. It was difficult to find a magician on his level.

"That leader of yours sounds terribly troublesome. Is this about the grave desecrations?"

Erika recalled that the case had been taken up by House Hafan. However, she couldn't quite imagine the term "inhuman wretch" fitting Claus' father.

"No, it's something else entirely."

"Such as?"

"It's not something I should bring up here, and my superior made it very clear that you are to remain completely uninvolved. I forgot to mention, I'm working under your blasted brother. I need to repay as much of my debt as I can so we

won't have to redraw the map of our territories," Claus said with hollow eyes as he recalled the figure he'd been presented with. The cost of the wands and scrolls he'd used in the ruins two months ago was nothing to scoff at.

Wow, Eduard. You're merciless even against a ten-year-old.

Erika lamented the deeds of her brother, but it occurred to her that allowing him to repay the debt with manual labor might actually be a form of compassion. Her brother was, after all, always kind in the strangest ways.

"Then you don't have to waste your valuable time dancing with me."

"Did you read my letter?"

"Yes, I certainly did. What about it?"

According to Anne, it had been a mistake. Claus had misworded something.

Did he come to correct himself? What was it supposed to say? As Erika considered such optimistic notions, Claus came out with terribly ominous words.

"About... what I said in the letter... I'm serious."

"Really? Serious about what?"

"Every word of it."

Erika's expression froze. *"You are strong. I will become a man who won't lose to you. Please wait for me."* If every word of that was serious, it really must have been a challenge. If things continued like this, she would be living her school life on hard mode.

It will be dangerous if I don't resolve this misunderstanding early, won't it?

Yes, it was urgent that she correct his mistaken impression that she was a strong person. After some deliberation, Erika carefully chose her next words.

"Claus, err, to be perfectly honest, I found your proposal rather bothersome. You and I are not cut from the same cloth, you see. I would really appreciate it if you gave up on such a forceful approach."

"What...?"

"The shoes you need filling are too big for me. But don't worry, I'm sure

there's someone out there far more worthy than I could ever be. I'll be rooting for you. I hope you'll find the capable partner you deserve someday. But from the depths of my heart, Claus, I just want to be your friend."

Claus was beaten down from harsh words from the girl he thought of so fondly.

"Friend..."

"Umm, are you listening? Claus? Hello?"

He was lost in a daze. It was like he was sleepwalking, dancing only because his body remembered how.

I do feel sorry for him. But now, Claus wouldn't aim for her as a rival. He wouldn't suddenly challenge her to a duel. *If you want a formidable foe, please settle for my big brother.*

The song conveniently ended, and Erika took a bow before slipping away from Claus' side. Claus was left in his stupor in the center of the floor. Other young girls around their age surrounded the poor boy and began squabbling over him.

For a moment, Erika hesitated over whether or not she should help him. However, if she were to monopolize him and invite any unnecessary envy, she would clearly be in greater danger. What's more, Erika had had more than enough of violent love affairs in her previous life, and getting involved in another one was the absolute last thing she wanted to do.

With a sidelong glance at the battle for Claus, she secretly made her escape.

9

Erika watched the young ladies flocking around the stunned Claus from afar.

This reminds me of something. Piranhas, maybe? she mused, now at a safe distance. Without much else to do, she searched for Tricia and Marquia, who she thought she was getting along well with, only to realize they were a part of the swarm.

Her next thought was to go to Anne, but the girl was already en route to extract her brother from his predicament. To fearlessly challenge over a dozen

noble ladies all older than herself, Anne had the makings of a hero.

Then I guess I should have a leisurely meal with Tir.

With renewed purpose, Erika began the journey to the table where Tirnanog lay low. All of a sudden, she heard a voice from behind.

“You must be Lady Erika, daughter of House Aurelia.”

She turned to find a boy with long, silver hair and deep, violet eyes. He was around thirteen—fourteen at most—and carried a small, purple dragon on his shoulder.

“You’re a good dancer for your age.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

“And you must be famished after so much dancing. Here, have a sweet.”

The boy snapped his fingers, like he was trying to look cool. The next instant, the attendant behind him presented a silver platter laden with all sorts of pastries.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m not very hungry at the moment.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. This one is my personal recommendation,” the boy said as he stuffed one of the pastries into his mouth. He held out another one for Erika.

Erika felt rather unsettled and hesitated a moment. While his consideration was misplaced, he seemed to bear no ill will, making it needlessly difficult to turn him down.

“Thank you kindly. Now then, might I ask your name?”

“What’s this I hear? You don’t know who I am? That’s not very becoming of a duke’s daughter, now, is it?”

“My apologies. This is my first time in the royal capital, after all. I’m regretfully ill-informed when it comes to Ignitia’s nobles.”

“I can’t say I blame you, daughter of Aurelia. It just goes to show that my name isn’t great enough to reach this continent’s western shores. I’ll have to work harder.” The boy smiled arrogantly before continuing on. “Remember it

well, as it will definitely benefit you one day. My name is Louie Ode-Ignitia. I am the younger brother of Lord Charles Ode-Ignitia, Margrave of Reconquista, the central hub of the Karkinos-Ignitia region.”

The Ode-Ignitia House was a branch family of Ignitia’s royal lineage. King Henri’s older brother had established it upon refusing the throne, which made Louie Prince August’s cousin. The house was reared to support the crown—to be an ode to Ignitia, as it were—but they still did have the rights to succession.

*He probably has absolutely nothing to do with me, but he’s still royalty.
Branch or not.*

Erika firmly donned the mask of a high-class noblewoman. Even if he seemed like a troublesome person, she was unable to simply ignore him, given his status. She finally and rather reluctantly took a bite of the pastry she’d been handed.

Louie watched her do so with a satisfied look on his face while accepting a drink from his attendant. Erika thought to ask for one too, but in the time it took her to chew the pastry, Louie shooed him away.

Having wet his whistle, Louie brought his lips to Erika’s ear and whispered, “Come to think of it, you’re quite an interesting girl. Calling August an angel, of all things.”

Erika could feel her face tighten.

Was he around at the time?

Her embarrassment came back to her in full force, but she played dumb and returned a smile.

“I guess I did. His Highness was simply so beautiful, I couldn’t help but say so.”

Rather than making a shoddy excuse that could come off as sarcasm, Erika decided to praise August instead. If she said the wrong thing when she didn’t know who might be listening, it could prove fatal.

Louie deliberately flipped his hair once, then twice, looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

“‘Beautiful’ is a word usually reserved for men like me.”

“Perhaps,” Erika said in a calm voice.

While Louie definitely had his looks going for him, he didn’t really stand out among the royals who were all beautiful in their own right. Not that she could say that to his face.

“Regardless, no matter how beautiful you think he is, you’re better off staying away from August. He’s, how should I put it... He’s a rose with thorns. Beautiful, but if you so much as brush a hand against him, your skin will tear and bleed. You’ve heard at least a thing or two, haven’t you?”

Why was he hinting at August’s scandalous rumors here, of all places? Something felt terribly off to Erika. It would be difficult for her if the other nobles came under the mistaken impression that she amused herself with improper gossip, so she was determined to immediately cut this conversation short.

“No, I tend to distance myself from such rumo—”

“Hold on, young lady. We shouldn’t speak of those stories surrounding the crown prince. Especially not here. There’s no telling which walls have ears, after all.” It had been Louie who brought it up, and yet his tone made it sound almost as if Erika were the one speaking ill of the boy. “Personally, I want to be on good terms with August, but he seems to despise me. That boy still can’t ride a dragon at his age, and I’m always up for helping him train, but he won’t even give me the time of day. It’s a tragedy. We’re cousins, aren’t we?”

“Sounds like you have your share of troubles.”

Erika felt it was dangerous to agree with anything Louie said and instead opted to commend him without giving her take on the matter. Contrary to what he said, she could sense it was actually Louie who hated August. They were rivals embroiled in a battle of inheritance, so perhaps Louie saw the crown prince as a hindrance.

He’s trying to take advantage of August’s ill reputation to lower his standing among prominent houses.

She took great care to not say anything committal. Even the slightest affirmation might give off the impression that the daughter of Duke Aurelia

supported Louie, and if she refuted him, her words could be manipulated in the exact opposite direction.

“He’s been in a right slump these past few years. I worry for him more with every waking day. He’s just a pitiful kid without anyone to rely on. I want him to know I’m here if he needs me.”

“You sure are kind, Lord Louie. I also find it hard to believe His Highness is the sort of person the rumors make him out to be.” This time, she chimed in in a way to make it sound like Louie was August’s ally. “If you want to support August, then I’ll join and—”

“No, you should give it up for now. He has a short fuse. If a defenseless young girl like you approaches him, who knows what he will do.”

“Oh, really...”

Louie downed the remaining liquid in his cup in one swig before he finally realized he hadn’t prepared a drink for Erika.

“Whoops, allow me to apologize for my tactlessness. I should get you one too.”

Louie called for his attendant and had him bring two fresh cups.

“Now drink,” he said, holding one out for Erika.

Erika could smell the pungent scent of alcohol wafting off the glass, and she hesitated to take it from him. This man was, evidently, serving alcohol to an eight-year-old girl.

What should I make of this?

Was he simply thick-skinned? Was he testing her? As Erika stood there, unable to suss out Louie’s true intent, a hand reached out and swiped the glass from the side.

The hand raised it up high and splashed its contents straight into Louie’s face.

“Wagh! Who are you, you insolent...!”

Erika looked up at the individual who was suddenly standing there without a sound.

Their interrupter was a tall figure whose face was concealed behind a masquerade mask. He was dressed like Ignitian nobility with a feathered cap, a mantle that glimmered with gold thread, and long, high-heeled boots. A tuft of blond hair spilled out from underneath his hat.

While Erika couldn't quite remember where, she knew she had seen this man somewhere before.

"Oh, my apologies. I thought you were holding it out, hoping for someone to wash off that filth. Heheh, my mistake. It wasn't filth at all; it was just your face."

"What insolence! Are you aware that I am Louie Ode-Ignitia?!"

"I've never even heard of you. Is that the name of some house out in the backwaters?"

"You bloody plebeian! Those words will be your last!"

What served as both an insult and a cheap provocation had Louie seeing red. The eyes behind the mask curled like a mischievous child's.

"Wait, are you—"

"Well then, I'll be taking the princess."

In one smooth motion, the masked figure removed his hat and threw it at Louie's face. In the brief moment Louie reflexively closed his eyes, the figure moved like lightning. He slammed a black wig he'd produced from his pocket down on Erika's head, hiding away her characteristic golden hair. He draped a gray cape he'd been wearing under his mantle over her shoulders, covering her luxurious blue dress. In no time at all, Erika had changed into a young Hafan noble.

The stranger also removed his disguise and pulled his hair free from its ponytail. He undid his cummerbund, unfolding it to reveal a black veil, which he wrapped around his head to conceal his hair color.

His stripped-off mantle was turned inside-out, then wrapped around the waist like a pareu. Finally, with a purposeful hunch, the mysterious individual had completely transformed into an old woman in a plain dress.

The quick-change took only a matter of seconds. Those around who had seen the series of sharp movements hung their mouths half open in amazement.

Once Louie had brushed off the hat, it was as if the masked man and Erika had disappeared entirely.

“I’ve got it, you’re—”

“Shhh, not now.”

The woman interrupted, discretely pressing a glass of water against Erika’s lips. Her voice was hoarse, as though she really were an old woman. However, she was none other than the self-proclaimed devil Erika had met in the depths of the Grand Cathedral.

Until a moment ago, her voice and appearance had undoubtedly been that of a man. Now that she was close, and Erika could scrutinize her face, she seemed to be nothing more than an elderly mistress.

The woman led a now-inconspicuous-looking Erika by the hand away from Louie and the other nobles. Erika soon found herself walking out onto a desolate terrace.

There wasn’t a single cloud to conceal the vast, starry sky overhead. The seas surrounding Ynys Negesydd were calm as could be, and the glassy surface of the water reflected twinkles from innumerable specks of light.

In the foreground of this resplendent scenery was August, standing there with a lonely smile on his face.

10

Goldberry leapt off of August and landed on the woman’s shoulder.

“Mmheehee, we’ll give you two some space, okay? August, make sure you apologize,” the woman said with a wink.

Before Erika could make heads or tails of the situation, the lady and the dragon had disappeared through a doorway. Erika stole an awkward glance at August to see he was making a somewhat awkward face himself.

“Good day, *Mr. Angel*.”

“I’m sorry. I see you’re angry at me.”

“Yes, a little.”

He gave a troubled smile and took a step toward her. Erika found herself inadvertently retreating a step. While he retained his joyful expression, August averted his eyes.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. You should keep at least that much distance from me.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If you get too close to me, Erika, the ill rumors will gobble you up too,” he said with flawless poise. Indeed, nary a shadow lingered on his face. His expression was wholly warm, accepting, and serene. From that, Erika could understand just how thick a mask August was wearing.

“I’m sorry, and thank you. It was just one day, and I’m the one who ruined it. But you made it an incredibly fun day for me.”

“Why does it have to be like this?”

“If you know about me, we won’t be able to converse at ease. And...”

“And what?”

“Once you know who he really is, the angel’s an angel no longer. That’s the rule.”

August placed his index finger on his lips and grinned. If only for a brief moment, it was as if the playful boy from the Grand Cathedral had returned. However, he turned his back to her all too quickly.

“August, did you want to be an angel?” Erika asked.

“Angel, devil, doesn’t matter. So long as I can soar through the skies.”

August looked up at the night sky. Although his back was turned, Erika could see his expression clearly in her mind’s eye.

He surely had that dry, empty smile on his face. His heart was so parched, so thirsty, that his tears wouldn’t come out no matter how sad he was. Erika knew

the feeling well.

She continued casting her questions to his back.

“You want to fly?”

“I want to fly.” His reply was surprisingly firm. He reached a shaking hand out to the distant stars that would never be within his grasp.

“I want to fly. As long as I can fly, everything will work out just fine. And we’ll all be happy.”

“August, you’re—”

“Just kidding. I don’t really expect you to understand.”

When he turned back to her, August was once again a perfect prince, as if he had been ripped straight from a painting.

“Even as our feet are planted on the ground, our hearts belong to the sky. That’s what it means to be a dragoon. I might be a complete failure, but my heart yearns like any other.”

The slight pain in Erika’s chest convinced her. *This person will fly, no matter what he has to sacrifice for it.*

His longing for the open skies would one day lead him to committing a taboo with the Beast of Contracts. He probably wouldn’t stop even if he knew that contract would completely deprive him of his ability to ride only six years later.

“We’re going off topic. Well, you see how it is. I’m sorry for holding you up.”

Seeing how determined he was to not give her the time of day, Erika understood. It would not be easy to break through the thick walls around his heart.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the strum of a stringed instrument. This was an Ignitian song; she had heard it in the central plaza. But this wasn’t the modern melody that carried Hafan and Aurelian influences. Instead, it bore a vaguely foreign flair. This was most likely closer to the song’s original arrangement.

Mixed in with the laid-back tune, she could hear the nonsensical, off-beat

humming of someone clearly enjoying themselves.

“This voice... Is it that woman from before?”

“I told her to quit her meddling...”

“So, she can play an instrument. She’s a woman of many talents.”

“Yeah, she—Palug can do pretty much anything.”

August’s face was stiff, and he had even forgotten to smile. Strange as it was, the way Erika saw it, this expression came to him far more naturally.

When Erika met his eyes with a soft smile, he awkwardly looked away. He was almost like a child who’d shown an immature side he wanted to keep hidden.

“Ah, it’s all ruined. It’s over. I wanted to give up, to cut ties just like that...”

“What are you talking about, August?”

“I’m sorry, Erika. I’m not going to give up on you just yet. I want to get to know you, just a bit more.”

August took Erika by the hand, looking up at her pleadingly. Seeing him so anxious caused Erika to soften even further.

“Very well. Let’s get along as two kindred, nearly friendless souls.”

“Nearly friendless... Come on, now.”

“Palug, was it? Do you have any friends apart from her?”

“Of course. I have Goldberry.”

“Any *human* friends?”

“Fine, I get it. You win. It’s just as you said; I have almost no friends.”

August had a sour look on his face as he raised his hands in surrender.

“Then if we become friends, your friend count will shoot up to one and a half, just like that. Isn’t that wonderful?” Erika chuckled.

“You have quite a way with numbers... but are you really alright with this?”

“Am I inadequate?”

“No, not at all. I couldn’t ask for more.” August bashfully laughed, gripping

Erika's hand tighter.

Even if his only friend is someone like me, it's surely better than having no one at all.

Erika knew all too well how isolation could torment the heart. When she had been the target of baseless, depraved rumors in her past life, she hadn't even managed to fake a laugh or a smile.

No, it wasn't just laughing. I couldn't even find it in myself to be angry.

If a childhood friend hadn't gotten angry on her behalf, she probably wouldn't have been able to bear it. Erika strongly wished to be someone like that for August.

"You don't have many friends either, Erika? I find that odd."

"I don't. But what's wrong with that? The number doesn't matter, so long as you have a few you really like."

"I guess that checks out. I would agree." With his eyes so wide, August seemed so childish and innocent.

The music suddenly turned tense and dramatic, as if urging them on. For some reason, she could now hear Goldberry chirping along with the tune.

"Are they watching us from somewhere?"

"It's hard to tell with just the starlight to go off of."

"Oh, I think I figured out what she wants."

August shrugged. The hand he had used to shake Erika's slipped away, and he presented it anew as he kneeled before her.

"This should shut her up. Lady Erika, would you do me the honor of a dance?"

"Yes, with pleasure."

"I'm really sorry. She always tends to overdo it."

With August taking the lead, the pair slid into a fluid dance. Only the self-proclaimed demon and a dragon were watching as they waltzed under the stars.

“You keep complaining, but you look like you’re having fun.”

“Truth be told, I felt somewhat envious when I saw you dancing with that magician.”

“You were watching?”

“Yep. I saw it all, including every instance of you almost stepping on your magician’s foot.”

“Ahaha. Let’s just keep that between us.”

August danced like the devil had left him. His feet were light and certain.

“I was jealous. I wanted to dance with you too. I’m having so much fun right now. Ah, how liberating it is to speak my mind.”

“Of course it is. Lying is a wearisome game to play.”

“My thoughts exactly. I’m run ragged every day. Perhaps I should be an honest boy when you’re around.”

“For example?”

“I want to fly. I want to fly. I want to fly, I want to fly, I want to fly.”

This was completely different from the painful monologue he had given before. He sounded like a spoiled child as he blurted out his heartfelt desire. While childish, his words were as pure as could be.

“Come to think of it, August, why can’t you ride dragons anyway?” Erika off-handedly asked. If August wanted to fly so badly, then what was preventing him from doing so?

“Wow...”

For a moment, August was at a loss for words. It was a little late, but Erika finally realized her question had been considerably insensitive.

“You might be the first person to say that to my face. That’s a bit refreshing.”

“I’m sorry. Was it rude?”

“No, it’s a whole lot easier than dancing around the topic. It makes me feel like I’m a nuisance to be avoided.”

“That means I’ve said something terribly tactless.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. I’m starting to think I might prefer people with no tact.”

This time, Erika was left struggling to find the right words. She regretted taking advantage of his tolerance to say whatever she wanted.

August heaved a deep sigh before opening his mouth again. “At birth, the nobles of Ignitia are all bestowed with a dragon’s egg. You’re only truly recognized once you’ve hatched, raised, and ridden your dragon.”

“You have Goldberry, don’t you?”

“She’s a smaller breed, meant for self-defense. That’s as big as she’ll get. Her two sisters will grow up to be much larger.”

“Is that how it works?”

“I’ve already decided on their names. The red dragon will be Briar, and the white one will be Bramble. They’ll grow up to be wonderful, beautiful dragons.”

August sounded very much like Eduard when he said that. He carried the bearing of a doting older brother.

“So you’re telling me you can’t ride a dragon because they won’t hatch?”

“Precisely. This is unprecedented for the royal family. No one knows why the eggs refuse to hatch... so at the very least, I was hoping to ride a generic dragon.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard.”

“Oh, riding a generic dragon is very difficult. Only one out of a hundred, maybe two hundred commoners born without a personal dragon has the talent to rise up as a dragoon. By raising them from eggs, the nobility forms a mental bond early on, guaranteeing a ride later in life. That’s why they keep telling me to wait until Briar and Bramble hatch, but...”

“You can’t wait that long?”

“I can’t.”

August wrapped a hand around Erika’s waist, lifted her up, and did a twirl.

“I asked the people who came to study dragon ecology. My father and his father both flew at age seven. I’m already ten, and not only can’t I fly, I can’t even ride... I don’t care if I’m not a genius rider like my predecessors. But I don’t want them to think the genius’ son is incompetent.”

With one last wide, sweeping turn, the music was over. Erika and August parted so only their hands were still joined and stared at each other.

“More importantly, I want to protect my mother’s honor. Riding a dragon is the only way for me to prove that I’m of royal blood.”

“August...”

The stars she could see beyond the prince’s face glittered spectacularly. The water’s surface reflected their light, making it difficult to tell where the sky ended and the sea began.

It’s beautiful, thought Erika, entranced. However, she inadvertently let her true thoughts reach her mouth.

“Obsessing over both your mother *and* your sisters is a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Did you just say something?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Erika hokily averted her eyes, but August calmly pursued the matter.

“Did you not just say something incredibly rude? Why don’t you look me in the eye and say it again.”

“It’s really nothing. Lalala! Why, August, you really are quite beautiful.”

Palug chose that exact moment to come over, a broad grin on her face. She seemed poised to tease the two of them. But if she would bring an end to this awkward exchange, so be it; for that moment alone, the self-proclaimed devil looked like an angel to Erika.

11

It was Erika’s second day on Ynys Negesydd. Tomorrow would be the day of

the joust, and the town filled with even more life as the Adventmas festivities neared their peak.

Erika once again received permission to go out from her father, so she set forth into town.

“Aren’t you glad you got to eat so many delicacies, Tir?”

“Indeed. It wasn’t enough to sate my stomach, but my tongue is satisfied.”

“I may have eaten too much.”

“So that’s why you did not attend that garden party or whatever it was.”

Today, her schedule was occupied by a gathering held not by the royal family but by the house of the previous queen, to which the marquis belonged. If she had to guess, it was mainly for the elderly nobles to meet and mingle. Duke Aurelia had received an invitation, but it was up to him whether he brought his daughter or not.

“Yes, well, that’s part of it.”

“Is it because you don’t want to meet that Louie boy you were complaining about?”

“That’s also part of it, but... you know, I really think I should take some action about that prophecy.”

“Oh, I see.”

The jousting tournament that would determine her fate awaited her. She only had one day left to avoid the next flag. However, Erika planned to not only avoid her own ruin, but to prevent August’s downfall as well.

If August fused with the Beast of Contracts, then no matter whose route the heroine chose in six years, there was a good chance the beast would still weaken. Once the beast separated from him, August would inevitably lose his riding ability—for good this time. Erika recalled that while he wasn’t the main focus in the game’s third route, August was unable to ride dragons in that one as well.

In short, August’s future as a dragoon was sealed the moment he made a contract for those transient abilities.

“You’re in quite a predicament yourself. Are you really in a position to help others? Well, come to think of it, you are the sort of human who chose to release me from my seal.”

“I mean, how can I just leave him be? Especially now that we’ve become friends.”

August’s words resounded in her ears. After wishing so strongly to fly, he didn’t seem like he’d be able to bear losing his riding ability forever.

“I completely fail to understand your outlook... but I can’t say I hate it.”
Tirnanog shrugged, his gestures practically screaming, *“Good grief,”* as he shook his head. *“In that case, we must take the initiative: find the Beast of Contracts and defeat it.”*

“That does seem like our best option. This tournament is where August falls off a dragon and grows desperate. But who’s to say it will never happen again?”

Perhaps he’d take a tumble next year instead, and perhaps someone else would mock him for it. She could only truly be certain nothing would happen if the Beast of Contracts was already defeated by then.

Alright, we have an objective. That’s a good place to start.

Erika’s goal was to find the Beast of Contracts hiding somewhere on Ynys Negesydd. She already knew of someone who probably knew where it was: August himself. Surely he had his leads; otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to reach the beast when push came to shove. Asking him would at least narrow down the possible locations to a certain degree.

“Off to the Grand Cathedral we go. If he’s not there, maybe we’ll try out the palace.”

“Very well. I’ll keep quiet.”

“I’m sorry, Tir.”

“It is of little consequence. Walking around with you is enjoyable enough.”

With Tirnanog displaying overall good will, Erika returned a bashful laugh. She lightly tapped her fist against his outstretched hand. With her trusty partner by her side, she made for the Grand Cathedral once more.



“Are you here, Mr. Angel?”

Erika called for August as she walked down the more desolate districts of the Grand Cathedral.

“Over here, Erika. I’ve been waiting.”

Erika turned toward the voice to see August looking up at the stained glass. He was exactly where Erika had met him the day before.

Is there something special about that glass? she wondered.

“How did you know I would come here?”

“I have a good friend with good ears.”

“Oh, so you asked Palug.”

The mysterious woman, Palug, called herself a devil. She didn’t appear to be a guard or an attendant. Erika hadn’t the slightest idea who she really was.

“I see you came as a merchant’s daughter today. That ribbon suits you perfectly.”

“I appreciate the compliment.”

Erika had donned the sort of clothing the daughter of a wealthy merchant might wear with emphasis placed on ease of movement. She wore a functional and simple blue dress with a white shirt and blue ribbon. Incidentally, she had coordinated the colors with a certain Alice in mind.

“So what do you want to do today? Instead of restricting yourself to the cathedral, do you want to see the architecture of other churches as well? Or shall I show you around town?”

“There’s so much to do...”

How was she supposed to draw out information on the Beast of Contracts? Pondering this troubling matter, Erika also looked up at the stained glass... and noticed something rather peculiar.

“Why is there barely any blue? Not that I have anything against red and yellow.”

“The pigment to make high-quality blue glass belongs exclusively to Gigantia. There’s some old blue glass from before the war, but it’s gradually becoming impossible to restore.”

Gigantia, a country on Karkinos, was an enemy of the united kingdoms. A series of bloody conflicts known as the Giant Wars had been waged between them for many long years. While there was currently a ceasefire in place, no one could possibly claim their relationship was favorable.

Consequently, products of Gigantia had risen in value.

“The scarcity is an issue in all the churches. I hear the pigment goes for twenty times its weight in silver.”

“Sounds like someone’s profiteering off of this.”

“Though for this stained glass in particular, the main focus is the sun, so it’s somewhat managing without blue.”

The glass depicted an angel, the Founding King, and a beautiful sun. It was a scene from the legend of the nation’s founding. Erika was entranced by it for a while before she returned to her senses. Now was not the time to appreciate art. She needed to locate the Beast of Contracts, and August was her best lead.

“You asked me what I wanted to do today. How about we look at sites pertaining to the Beast of Contracts?”

“Hmm, I’m surprised someone from the west knows about that. Where did you hear about that monster?”

“I assume it’s because Ignitian royalty has married into House Aurelia a few times before. I’ve heard a thing or two about it.”

Though the information really came from game playthroughs in another life, she couldn’t just say such a thing, so she decided to chalk it up to their houses’ past relations.

“A miraculous beast that will grant any wish. Really sounds like a fairy tale, doesn’t it?”

“Is it just a fairy tale?”

“Yep. It’s neither a magic nor a phantasmic beast. It’s just a fantasy,” August

stated, sounding somewhat disappointed. It seemed he didn't believe in it himself.

Oh, but that's the thing, Mr. Angel. I hear it's out there somewhere.

Erika made sure her thoughts didn't reach her face as she closely studied August's expression. If he really didn't know, then perhaps that bloody incident wouldn't happen, and she couldn't ask for more.

"But even if it isn't real, it's pretty interesting, isn't it?" August continued.

"Yes, it's like chasing a dream. Can we try looking for it anyway?"

"Hmm, then that settles it. We'll spend today exploring the legend of the Beast of Contracts."

"Thank you, August."

"But in that case, we'll have to narrow it down a bit, or one day won't be enough."

"Are there a lot of places related to the Beast of Contracts?"

"The general population will say the legends belong to several different beasts, but the royal family insists they all stem from a single entity. I thought we'd trace a few of the fragmented ones."

"I see. You sound pretty knowledgeable."

"I should hope so. I'm probably the most knowledgeable in Ignitia at the moment," August said, his smile simply brimming with confidence. "Alright, let's start with what's in the Grand Cathedral."

August looked up at the stained glass one last time before assuming his position as tour guide and marching off.

Erika followed him to the front of a mural she hadn't seen before. It was a painting of a golden, catlike life-form and what seemed to be a young boy. The painting technique used appeared to be a lot older than that of the other works she'd seen.

"This piece is called *The Riddle*. They say if you beat the Beast of Contracts in a game of riddles, it will grant you one wish, no matter what it is... That's why I

found myself researching the beast, once upon a time.”

“What for?”

“I thought that if I wished for it, I would be able to ride a dragon.”

August’s fingers traced the cat’s golden fur. He didn’t seem to be terribly distressed at the moment. It was more so that he was simply stating a fact. Despite this, Erika felt a restlessness in her chest. How much easier would it be if she could just tell him, *“You’d better give up. That path will only lead you to ruin”*?

“But isn’t it dangerous to make a contract with the beast?”

“Yes, the story goes that you’ll be eaten if you lose the game. Even if I didn’t make a contract, I thought maybe I could find a hint on how to make my wish come true with my own strength.”

“I get it.”

“Unfortunately, it’s all complete fiction. It has to be; it’s way too convenient. Who in their right mind would believe you can get anything you want just by making a contract?”

“What happens in the fairy tales?”

Sometimes, a fragment of truth could be hidden in stories. Erika had experienced this firsthand with the story of the Seafarer’s Ruins, and thus she wondered if this one would be the same.

“There are a number of different stories, and they all have so many versions that no one can say what actually happened. There are only two I know of that have a definite beginning and end. In the first, a pandemic was killing a great many people, so someone made a wish to the Beast of Contracts and asked it to eat the disease.”

“I see...”

“The beast did as it was told, and many lives were saved. However, it came at a cost: the one who made the contract was also swallowed whole. These days, they’re worshipped as a saint... Unfortunately, the shrine’s in another city. We’ll have to see it some other time.”

“Erm, swallowed whole, you say...”

This was practically foreshadowing her fate in *Liber Monstrorum*, and Erika didn't quite know what to say. She prayed it wasn't a beast that had to eat someone every time it granted a wish.

“In the other story, a boy suffering from a snake bite made a contract and gained the power to control snakes. The Beast of Contracts had once defeated the King of Serpents in battle, and thus it held the authority to reign supreme over all serpents.”

“The power to control snakes? That's a pretty strange story.”

“Again, it demanded an offering of flesh and blood for the wish. Just as the boy was about to be killed, he challenged and defeated it in a game of riddles, winning him more convenient terms... That's what the mural's about.”

“So that's where the riddle comes up.”

“Yeah. The beast was placed under a curse from God, so it couldn't decline any riddle challenges.”

“How peculiar.”

“No, it's pretty by the book. Otherwise, humans have no way to triumph over such a creature. It's only good manners for God to work in something of the sort.”

Sure enough, from what she could remember of fairy tales in her previous life, if a monster couldn't be defeated with brute force, it was often defeated with wit. In short, the Beast of Contracts was a cryptid that would do whatever you wanted if you could outsmart it.

“Now, let's move on. Did you get a good look at the obelisk right in front of the cathedral?” August said as he headed toward the entrance.

Erika asked the most important question as she gave chase. “So, August, do you know where the Beast of Contracts might be?”

“If I knew, I'd have made a contract ages ago, and my wish would have come true.”

“I see. I guess that makes sense.”

At present, it seemed August didn't know where the beast was and had never even made contact with it. Was he hiding enough hints to find it in a few days? Or were they going to discover a decisive hint now? She couldn't say for sure.

I hope this search doesn't just stir up the hornets' nest.



The plaza in front of the Grand Cathedral was dominated by a monument that was around twice the height of an adult. Erika had already seen this obelisk a few times by now, but she had never realized it had anything to do with the Beast of Contracts.

August stared absentmindedly at the relic. "I can't say it too loudly, but the Beast of Contracts is the ancestral deity of the Ignitian royal family. The obelisk's pedestal was made after we were assimilated into the faith of the One True God, but the pillar came from Karkinos—from older days," he explained.

"I don't see anywhere a beast could hide."

"Me neither. You think it could be hollow underneath?"

"Not very realistic."

"Right, there aren't any air holes... There's an old song that goes, '*The beast must sleep beneath the sun,*' so I thought there might be a chance."

The stone obelisk worked as a sundial, but there were no actual mechanisms in sight, and when she tapped it, the pedestal sounded pretty solid.

"There's no hollow space in the pillar, either," August added.

"I doubt there's any creature that can survive after being sealed into a—"

Erika cut herself off as her eyes met with Tirnanog at her feet.

Her partner looked up at her curiously. She couldn't forget about the beast she had revived when she'd destroyed a stone monument.

"There's a chance it's been sealed in the obelisk itself with some sort of spatial or time magic. Perhaps if you fulfill certain conditions, or bring the right offering to wake it up, then maybe—"

"You're suddenly getting quite specific."

“I’m just trying to imagine the most common scenarios.”

Of course, the experience she spoke of had happened in the deepest depths of an underground labyrinth. It was hard to imagine a dangerous beast being sealed in broad daylight where so many people passed by.

“An offering, eh?” muttered August.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“I’m not. I mean, going off those legends, it might require human sacrifice.”

“Yes, that would be a bit difficult to arrange.”

Erika and August shared a sincere nod. They spent a bit longer staring at the obelisk, and then August clapped his hands together.

“Oh, that’s right. There *is* something special about the obelisk. Almost all of it’s been scraped away, but you see those faint letters carved in?”

“Yes, I can just barely make them out.”

“There was a time when all the epitaphs from when we worshiped the Beast of Contracts were scraped off and replaced with hymns to the One True God. All that’s left are the vestiges of what was erased.”

“Perhaps they wanted to cover up any evidence of a beast god that swallows people whole?”

“Whoever did it was very thorough with his work.”

A real shame. It would have been such a valuable lead, August’s expression seemed to say as he stared at the ancient letters that were as good as gone.

“Alright, on to the next place.” August resumed the tour for the three of them.



All the clinics and apothecaries were decorated with ornaments modeled after a cat-headed beast. These decorations, called “sick-eating lynxes,” would be placed around entrances and water sources as talismans to devour or scare off any bad ailments that might try to invade.

The stalls also carried traces of the Beast of Contracts. Charms made of cat’s

eye meant for pregnant women and infants were sold all around Ynys Negesydd. It seemed the beast was the protector of children as well.

A wide array of legends remained in what was left of the few temples and shrines dedicated to the Beast of Contracts. They passed by a statue of a strange monster with a lute in its hand, a mural of an anthropomorphic cat on a quest, and a series of deep gashes in an altar that were said to be the claw marks of the beast.

Erika found them all so curious and interesting, but the beast itself was still nowhere to be found.

“It’s been two years since I’ve been to an apothecary,” August told her as he lazily stretched out his arms.

“They have wonderful plant specimens I’ve never seen before. I’ll need to take some home with me.”

The apothecaries had been Erika’s favorite among all the places they’d visited. She was especially intrigued by the herb garden of the apothecary built into the monastery, which was a treasure trove of rare flora imported from Karkinos. A number of the flowering plants had a unique charm to them, and Erika wanted to try her hand at raising them herself.

“Are you sure? That sounds like a lot of work.”

“Hey, I might be hopeless, but I’m still an alchemist in the making. I’m interested in rare reagents.”

“How old are you again? Eight? It’s pretty admirable to be doing alchemy at your age. Do you plan on going to Lindis when you grow up?”

“I do... though it’s been an endless source of worry for me.”

Erika spoke a bit about her complete lack of talent as an alchemist—how she was unable to regulate the mana in her body and therefore unable to create wands, or any other magic items for that matter.

August stayed quiet, only adding in a word now and again to show that he was listening.

“I see. You have it rough, too. Looks like I can’t just play the tragic hero

around you.”

“I’m the youngest child, so I don’t bear any major responsibilities. I’m not under nearly as much pressure as you.”

“But still, it’s pretty harsh to be the only one unable to do what everyone else pulls off like it’s nothing.”

“Right... I’m worried about how I’ll play it off when I enter the academy.”

“It’s not easy being the bottom of the class. Especially when you’ve got a reputation to protect.”

Erika felt her suppressed anxiety spilling out. She hadn’t intended to share these complaints with anyone, but it was easy to talk to August as he shared similar worries.

“Well, there’s no use getting too down over it,” he ultimately conceded.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Oh, right. How about I bring you to my secret base?”

“What sort of place is that?”

When Erika looked up, August was grinning.

“There’s a secret room only royalty knows about. No, wait. I guess Palug knows about it too.”

“Then Palug will be there too?”

“But we’ll stand out if we loiter around there during Adventmas. How about we go after the crowds are gone? If I’m remembering right, House Aurelia is taking an extended stay, right?”

“Yes. Even after Adventmas is over, my father plans to stay a few more days for work.”

“Alright, it’s a deal.”

In the end, Erika learned nothing concerning the whereabouts of the Beast of Contracts. Such a dangerous creature wouldn’t be anywhere that could be found so easily. The way Erika saw it, everything would work out so long as she could find and incapacitate it by the time she returned to Aurelia.

The evening bell chimed. Before she knew it, their shadows had stretched out considerably.

“Should we get going now? You’ll worry your parents if you’re too late. I’ll walk you to the villa.”

On the way back to House Aurelia’s villa, August suddenly looked up at the sky. Without saying a word, he watched as the hordes of flying dragons returned to their stables. It was as though he was enchanted by a dazzling sight; his eyes belonged to a boy who was deeply in love.

His gaze caused an uneasiness to bloom inside Erika.

“August, you’d better not sneak your way into the joust. Promise me, okay?”

“How could I? I don’t have a dragon to perform with, and I can’t even ride.”

“I’m sure you’ll ride someday. You’ll be a fine dragoon.”

“Hahaha. You make it sound so easy.” August gave a lonesome, powerless laugh.

“I hear that things work out better if you try to be optimistic,” Erika offered.

“You want me to be optimistic? Now that’s asking a lot. Then, in the spirit of optimism, how about I make a request?”

“What is it? If it’s within my power, I’ll try to grant it.”

“You’re sure about that? Then allow me... this!”

All of a sudden, August smoothly plucked away the ribbon binding Erika’s hair.

“Huh?! You dare tease a lady like that?!”

August mockingly waved the stolen ribbon back and forth, chuckling all the while.



“I’m doing it *because* you’re a lady. Why, it’s only customary for a dragoon to take to the skies with a belonging of his lady’s in hand to show his devotion.”

He jokingly used it to tie back his own hair. He looked the spitting image of a sweet little girl, and it suited him perfectly.

You’ve got enough feminine charm as it is!

Erika couldn’t believe he would grow to look like a suave and flirty pickup artist one day. She didn’t really mind giving it to him considering how well he pulled it off, but she despised the fact that he’d pulled a fast one on her.

“Give it back! I have nothing to give to a naughty boy.”

“Oh, come now. What have you got to lose from giving me just this one?”

“Why, I’m losing a *ribbon*! A very nice one at that!”

August gave a joyous laugh, easily avoiding Erika’s swipe to reclaim her possession. He looked like he was having so much fun that Erika hesitated over whether or not she should even take it back. After all, she far preferred this lively August to that alabaster prince.

“Aren’t we friends? Can’t you spare just one ribbon for me?”

“Well, I guess...”

“Alright. Yep, that settles it!”

In the moment Erika faltered, August sprinted away. She quickly took off after him.

“One day,” he cried, “I’ll take this proof of our friendship to the skies, I promise! Just you wait!”

August’s smile glowed in the setting sun. Erika pictured the scene, August flying high in the air with her ribbon fluttering in the breeze.

I’m sure it’ll make me so proud to see him.

With that in mind, Erika continued to watch August in the fleeting light.

Chapter 2: The Joust

1

At last, the day of the joust arrived. Before the tournament began, Duke Aurelia brought Erika out to see the procession of various dragons gathered from all across the land. They came in shades of red, blue, white, black, and more, and their scales ranged from orthodox solid colors to patterns of dappled spots or mesmerizing stripes. From gentle-looking giants to dragons with menacing faces covered in spikes, they all kindly welcomed the spectators.

“There is an astounding number of humans and dragons here.”

“Yes, the joust is one of the more prestigious contests of our united kingdoms.”

Tirnanog was by Erika’s side, carrying her leather bag as per usual. However, once they reached the spectator seats, he was to go off on his own.

“Tir, we should only do it as a last resort, but...”

“Leave it to me. If I get serious, there is no human who can outrun me.”

August wasn’t supposed to appear in the joust, but there was no guarantee there would be no surprises. On the off chance there were, Erika wouldn’t be able to leave her seat in a jiffy, so the plan was for Tirnanog to tail August and track down the beast.

Erika pressed on with her father.

The spectators and dragoons weren’t the only ones interacting with the dragons. Researchers dispatched from Lindis dotted the place, examining the dragons and taking notes. They wore the badge of the crested ibis, and they could be made out at a glance. One member of this fine group raised his head and called out.

“Is that the Honorable Duke of Aurelia? It has been far too long, Your Grace!”

“Oh, hello, Elric.”

The man named Elric was a naïve, friendly, and gentle-looking young man. His hair was ruffled and gray, and his eyebrows gave off the impression that he was prone to worry. His eyes were gray with a faint hint of violet. He wore a gray robe that seemed to be his personal attire rather than a uniform. His awkward, somewhat troubled smile left such a strong impression that it took closer inspection to see that he rivalled Eduard with his dashing looks.

Wait a minute. Elric? I’m pretty sure he’s one of the game’s potential love interests. Erika reveled in her unexpected good fortune. This man could be none other than Elric Actorius, the professor from *Liber Monstrorum*.

Elric and the duke got into a friendly chat. From what she could glean from it, he was Eduard’s contemporary, and while still a student, had come to the Adventmas festivities as a teacher’s assistant. He spoke with an overly serious look on his face, but the fact that his glasses were just a little crooked made him seem a bit like a dolt. Erika squirmed at her growing urge to straighten them.

He was apparently a close friend of Eduard’s, but Erika couldn’t comprehend why they would get along.

Do they have a shared interest or something? Ah, come to think of it...

Erika recalled how he’d majored in magic beast research. In that case, there was nothing peculiar about him being close to her brother.

Once all the formalities were out of the way, Elric’s eyes turned to Erika.

“Right, I don’t think you’ve met before. This is my daughter, Erika,” said Ernst.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Elric.” Erika tried to greet him with as childish of a smile as she could muster.

“Oh, no need for that. I’m just a lowly commoner student, after all.” Elric’s cheeks flushed ever so slightly, and as he spoke he attempted to correct his glasses with shaking hands.

Duke Aurelia honored his humility with a warm smile. “Eduard told me all about how your papers are getting published one after the next,” the duke said, teasing him. “You’re still so young, yet you show a lot of promise.” Apparently,

Elric really was a talented and earnest individual.

“I still have a ways to go... My research can only move forward thanks to Eduard, you know.”

“Wow, that’s incredible. Should I call you Mr. Actorius?”

“Oh no, oh no, oh no. I’m still a student, so, um, that’s far more than I deserve!”

As Erika gazed at him with sparkling eyes, his face turned redder and redder, and he began to panic. Duke Aurelia was not oblivious to this, so he casually changed the subject to give the young man a hand.

“Come to think of it, what are you here for, Elric? Did you come to help out with the matches?”

“I’m here to inspect the dragons who will participate today. We need to make sure no one’s doping them with potions or using dangerous equipment that’s prohibited in friendly matches.”

Erika was secretly appalled. She had never even considered that the dragoons of this country would go so far as to use such underhanded means. Did that just go to show how serious the competitors were?

“Oh! On that note, do you know where Eduard is, by any chance?”

“My son had some...” the duke paused and looked around before continuing, “pressing matters to attend to.”

All I know is that it was a royal decree, and he has to carry it out in secret. Though from her father’s reaction, Erika realized he quite likely knew the details of the mission.

“Is he investigating the desecration of those graves? First Lindis, and now this. There have been way too many of them lately.”

“No, I can’t go into detail right now, but it’s something else.”

“I see... Got it.”

There was something Elric had said that intrigued Erika.

An incident in Lindis... Is he talking about that night we ventured into the

Seafarer's Ruins?

That night, Eduard had hurried to the Academy of Magic for some urgent business. If it had been another case of desecration, that would explain his haste.

As Erika was putting together what she'd gathered thus far, Duke Aurelia and Elric suddenly looked at her as though finally remembering she was there. Erika smiled back, putting on an act as an oblivious little girl.

"Alright, let's leave it at that."

"Err, of course!"

Their conversation came to an abrupt end. The looks on both their faces made it clear they had accidentally let Erika hear something they shouldn't have been discussing at all.

"Until next time, Elric."

"Certainly, Your Grace. I'll be counting on you."

After parting ways with Elric, the duke and Erika made way for the joust's VIP section. That was where they would find the seats prepared explicitly for the royal family and the three formerly royal houses—Hafan, Lucanlandt, and Aurelia.

Will August be there? Erika grew increasingly worried. He's not going to sneak off and ride a dragon... is he?

She entered the stadium gates, a slight anxiety urging her on.



The jousting stadium had been decorated with banners bearing the symbol of each region.

A red flame and golden dragon for the south.

A white flower and silver wolf for the north.

A silver moon and black forest for the east.

A golden star and lapis sea for the west.

The VIP seats were built just a little higher than the normal guest seats. Instead of steering them toward the gold and blue banner, Duke Aurelia led Erika to the red one.

The king and queen, as well as the twin prince and princess, were already there, as were Duchess Hafan and Anne. Thanks to the tragedy the year before, the seats for Lucanlandt were all vacant.

August was nowhere in sight.

“Do you know where August is?” Erika casually asked his parents after giving her greetings.

“He said he wasn’t feeling well and returned to his room. He used to look forward to watching the joust every year. I wonder what happened. I can’t help but feel sorry for the boy,” said the king.

“I’m sure August will be happy to know you’re so worried about him,” the queen added politely. Both her and her husband’s eyes were gentle as they looked at Erika.

“I said something rude to August at the banquet the night before last, so I wanted a chance to apologize. It’s a shame, but it will have to wait until next time. You have my utmost gratitude for this invitation to the joust.”

Erika lowered her head, then went and took a seat in her father’s shadow.

Is he really in his room?

She wanted to confirm his actual whereabouts, but in this situation, it would be difficult to slip away and check. That being the case, what was she supposed to do if she sent Tirnanog out and then something unforeseen happened here? She needed to keep her priorities straight.

Her gaze fell upon Tirnanog at her feet, who was still on standby for the time being.

“Oh, I see Blackcurrant is flying this year, Your Majesty.”

“By God, you’re right! I always envy those eyes of yours, Ernst. Who’s the rider?”

Duke Aurelia had immediately started up a friendly conversation with the

king.

“They’re wearing a helmet, so I can’t see their face. Solid black armor, no crest... and a blue ribbon wrapped around the left arm.”

“A mysterious black knight? What’s more, with an oath to a lady? Now this should be a sight to see. Oh, this takes me back. In my younger days, I too would hide my face to participate. I was just around August’s age, and it irritated me to no end how the age restriction prevented me from joining in earnest.”

The king looked over the dragoons with childish glee.

He must really like dragons.

But while she found the king getting worked up like a young boy somewhat heartwarming, Erika couldn’t ignore the disturbing words that had emerged during their chat. An unidentified black knight with a blue ribbon... The fact that the king was also allowed to hide his face and participate bothered her.

It can’t be him, right?

Feeling uneasy, Erika asked her father upfront, “Father, which dragon is Blackcurrent?”

“You see that large, black dragon? She’s a twenty-meter class, open to all spur-of-the-moment competitors if they think they can handle her.”

Her eyes followed Duke Aurelia’s pointer finger to a magnificent black dragon.

“The joust is also a means to pick out talented prospective dragoons, young Erika,” King Henri explained, “You know, the ones who would otherwise be drowned out by the crowds. But when it comes to the twenty-meter class, the rider must be considerably skilled. It’s been five years since Blackcurrent has flown with a last-minute entry.”

“In other words, Erika, while that black knight might not belong to a brigade, he is an incredibly competent rider,” Duke Aurelia added.

“Even if Blackcurrent is mild-mannered, she’s still a twenty-meter class. Simply riding her is a commendable feat. That’s precisely the sort of talent I’m looking for,” said the king, looking rapturously at the black dragon and black-

clad rider.

The more she heard, the more Erika's suspicions grew.

That has to be August on Blackcurrent, right? Please, please, just be some nameless, unrelated genius.

Just in case it *was* August, she prayed to whoever would listen, *Please, don't let him fall from his dragon.*

But with no heed to these prayers, the horn to signal the start of the joust resounded through the stadium.

2

Adventmas joust matches were divided into three different classes. The five-meter class consisted of dragons with an overall wingspan of about five meters—these were roughly three meters from nose to tail and comparable to a pony in body size. Secondly, the ten-meter class had a wingspan of ten meters and an overall length of around six. Finally, the largest class was made up of dragons with a wingspan of twenty meters, which were twelve-meter-long behemoths.

The arena was surrounded by magicians deploying a protective circle. Alchemists armed with Shield wands and Barrier wands were ready on standby.

The five-and ten-meter-class matches proceeded without issue. The ten-meter victor, a knight atop a bronze dragon, was showered in flowers and cheers as he triumphantly raised his left hand to the crowd. Farther down his arm was a ribbon tied neatly over his armor. Had this knight also sworn devotion to some noble lady?

The fierce downpour of flowers continued even as the bronze dragon made its exit. A number of garlands ended up caught on its horn and spikes. During the course of Adventmas, the victorious knights were hailed as heroes while their dragons would be garnished with even more flowers, adored and respected by all.

Erika joined in from her VIP seat, tossing a garland that had been prepared for her. As she did so, she locked eyes with Anne, who was sitting on the opposite side of Ignitia's royal family. The two shared a smile.

Come to think of it, what happened to Claus after that? Was he alright? I'll have to ask her all about it.

Erika strained her ears to pick up the conversation between Anne, the queen, and Duchess Hafan. They had gotten into a heated discussion about how to tastefully carry oneself in Ignitian dresses, and how to protect the skin from the southern sun, among other quite womanly topics.

And here she was, getting all worked up over dragons with her father and the king. They were worlds apart, or so Erika thought as she offered a self-deprecating chuckle.

As that was going on, the joust shifted to the twenty-meter class. Even though Erika wasn't participating herself, she could feel herself grow ever more anxious. The black-clad knight who might be August had the first match.

A black dragon and bronze dragon descended to the arena. Just one flap of their wings was enough to scatter Erika's golden locks hither and thither. Previously, when the dragons had flown in close, she had been assailed by such strong gusts that she'd been afraid she might be blown out of her seat. But when the twenty-meter class came out, she was practically sucked into a vicious cyclone.

Right before the match began, Duke Aurelia and the king activated Raptor's Sight with their wands.

The Raptor's Sight wand had a tip of hawk's eye. Its shaft was maple with a hexagonal basket-weave pattern engraved into its surface, then sealed with euphrasia-based resin. Its pommel was carved in the shape of an eagle's head, and its wick was a powdered mixture of bone from ten different species of raptors.

Its effect improved visual acuity, making it perfect for the match.

"Hmm, I see a bit of gold embroidery on his blue ribbon. Judging by that color combination, I take it his lovely lady is from Aurelia? He's quite small for a knight. It's a pity I can't see his face. This is going to bug me for a while."

With his enhanced eyes, the king took a long, hard look at the mysterious knight.

Erika's heart skipped a beat and then sank. The king's description of the ribbon matched the one Erika had given August.

"Do you want to have a look, little lady? Here, use this. My treat."

"But, Your Majesty—"

"Now, now, what does it matter?"

Suppressing Duke Aurelia's objection, the king handed over his wand with a grin.

"It is an honor."

While she felt a little guilty, Erika accepted it. Now that it had come to this, she had to use this opportunity to make absolutely certain whether or not that black knight was August.

"I can hardly bring myself to ask when I'm already taking advantage of your kindness, but may I swing it twice?"

"Go ahead. Go wild. Swing it however you want," the king said happily.

Erika equipped a silk alchemist's glove her brother had given her as a gift before using the Raptor's Sight wand. Just one swing was more than enough to follow the match, and two swings improved her sight even further.

I knew it! That's my ribbon!

The ribbon wrapped around the knight's arm enlarged in her vision as though she were zooming in with a camera lens. It was blue cloth with gold embroidery. The design was a match, and it had been hand-tailored, so it would be nigh impossible to find another just like it.

In other words, that black knight hiding his identity was August. She was now certain of it.

What do I do? Erika was taken aback. By this point, all she *could* do was pray he didn't fall and try to think of the right words to say to him if he did.

At that moment, the whistle was blown. The two opposing dragoons brandished their long spears and bowed to one another.

In a dragon joust, two dragoons competed against each other for superiority.

If it were held as a death match, there wouldn't be nearly enough dragoons to spare, so instead, it was set up similar to point sparring.

Small wooden shields were affixed to three points: the rider's left shoulder, the dragon's left chest, and the rear left of the saddle. Victory was determined when any one of them was destroyed. The riders were permitted only one long spear and one sword to accomplish this. Additionally, if a rider fell from his saddle or dropped both of his weapons, the game went to his opponent.

The dragon itself could be used for defense or as a distraction, but any direct attacks with its claws, fangs, and breath were prohibited.

After the bow, the two wrapped their right arms around their spears and readied their charge. The masses of black and bronze took off in a cloud of dust, rapidly rising higher and higher as their massive wings caught the wind.

"Impressive. I could see he wasn't just anyone from how he carried himself on the ground, but this is something else."

"What do you mean by that, sire?"

The king joyfully answered this question, as if he had been waiting for someone to ask. "You see, dragons are creatures that reflect the mental state of their riders. Even more so when it comes to battle. Have a look. The sway of the black dragon's neck is much more contained than the bronze dragon's, right? Blackcurrent has always been a good-natured dragon, but it's quite rare for her to trust a first-time rider to that degree."

An ominous thought crossed Erika's mind.

When did he get so good at riding? Don't tell me he already made his contract!

While she fretted, the match was already reaching its climax. The dragons entangled like a tornado, crossing paths time and again in the air. Simply chasing the black and bronze shadows that swapped places at a dizzying pace almost made Erika nauseous.

Under August's control, Blackcurrent was at times as daring as an eagle, at times as graceful as a swallow, skillfully skirting around the enemy dragon with her massive body and just barely staying out of reach.

August had more than just riding skills up his sleeve; his spearmanship was also that of a seasoned rider. It was like he had become one with the dragon, his spear acting as another one of Blackcurrent's claws. Even their breathing was in sync as he aimed at the opposing dragoon.

The spears met once, then twice, and finally, August went in for the kill. As his opponent brushed aside his spear for a third time, August disappeared from his field of vision. Blackcurrent executed a nose dive the instant his opponent fell for his feint. Slipping right by the bronze dragon's stomach, August used the force his foe had imparted to his spear to spin it into a reverse grip.

Not a moment after Blackcurrent took the bronze dragon's rear, August channeled the momentum of the sharp turn into his weapon and slammed it into the back of his opponent's saddle.

His quick work took only two seconds to execute. By the time his foe had turned to see him, a bisected, wooden shield was already headed for the ground.

The referee raised a flag from the stand. It was August's victory.

Applause erupted from the crowd, and both the king and Duke Aurelia spared no effort in heaping praise on this mysterious figure.

"His skill with the spear is commendable, Your Majesty. I can hardly believe he is a young boy."

"Indeed. Perhaps he's already made a name for himself on horseback."

The knight on the bronze dragon removed his helmet and raised a hand in resignation. August, meanwhile, passed overhead while flying upside-down, lightly high-fiving the knight as he went by.

It took some skillful control to pull off that acrobatic maneuver, flying just close enough to barely make contact.

The aghast look from the bronze knight was met with a playful wave of the hand. Surely the black knight was giving a refreshing smile under his helmet. Instead of showing his face, he did a trick, standing up on the unsteady saddle of his soaring dragon and bowing to the audience.

Once again, the crowd whipped up a whirlwind of cheers. It was still only the first match, yet the crowd was gushing. The king sprang to his feet, banging his hands together.

“Magnificent! I’m getting that black knight onto our brigade no matter what! It really is a shame... I wish August could have seen that! I’m sure he would have been that knight’s biggest fan!” The king offered his high praise not knowing he was talking about his own son.

The black knight and his dragon steadily piled up victories, moving through the bracket toward the finals. In the final match, he would face off against the silver-armored Louie atop his white dragon, Camellia. The fuse was lit on this fateful confrontation.

3

The grounds were quite devastated by the time the semifinals reached their close, and some tidying up was in order. A number of dragons with stalwart, bull-like builds pulled along what looked like oversized rakes; apparently, just leveling the vast arena took ample time and effort.

The finals would be held with the yet-unmasked August on Blackcurrent going up against Louie Ode-Ignitia on Camellia. It wasn’t just August; Louie had also reached the finals through a stream of one-sided victories.

In all of Louie’s matches, Camellia had exceeded his competitors’ dragons in both speed and power. Even if there hadn’t been much disparity in the riders’ abilities, the differences in the dragons’ physical abilities had been too wide of a gap to bridge. If that wasn’t enough, Louie had a thing for playing rough. He was prohibited from using his dragon’s fangs, claws, and breath, but he made full use of everything else available to him.

This crude way of fighting was a staple in the Ignitia-Karkinos region, which was a land at war more often than not. The dragoons who hailed from this region, both the greenhorns and the seasoned veterans, carried with them an abundance of real combat experience. Their combat style included riding techniques that were tailored to take down giants.

“As a knight, I cannot praise his way of fighting, but as a soldier, he is admirable. The violent way he conducts his matches will be a good wake-up call to our young knights who haven’t fought many real battles.”

“I see. Still, you seem much more interested in Blackcurrant’s anonymous rider.”

“Can you blame me? I am but a lowly child of man. My intentions as a king are a separate matter from my personal interests.” The king winked at Duke Aurelia, and the momentary gesture made him strongly resemble August. “An incredible rider’s taken the stage. Did you see his coiling movements?! Magnificent!”

“His offense was so bold, I could hardly believe he wasn’t a proper dragoon.”

Henri was completely entranced by how the black knight fought. Even Erika, who had barely any knowledge on the subject, could sense a sort of beauty in the way he used his spear that she couldn’t quite put into words.

While the king and the duke enjoyed their pleasant chat, a visitor climbed up to the nobles’ seats.

“Hello, Your Majesty, Your Grace. I apologize for interrupting your conversation.”

“Oh, Elric, my boy. Did something happen?”

“The inspection team raised a report of suspected foul play through magic.”

Elric took out a roll of parchment from the folds of his robe, and the two gentlemen took a peek.

“Hmm, magic cast on Blackcurrant... The black knight must have done it, then.”

“So it seems, Your Majesty. Due to the incident in Hafan, each and every one of our highly skilled magicians are out, so we don’t have the full details. All we could pick up were the faint traces of concealment magic to skillfully cover up whatever has been done.”

Erika froze in place. There had been no mention of August using foul play in the match anywhere in *Liber Monstrorum*, nor did she take him as the sort who

would. Doing something so questionable to be able to ride wouldn't clear up the doubts about his blood, so to August, such trickery would be completely meaningless.

Then someone is plotting something.

Or perhaps, since her actions had changed the initial setting, another force had gotten to work correcting history. As she considered the idea, a large cheer rose from the crowd. The black and white dragons had entered the ring.

Unable to contain himself, the king jumped up and screamed, "What is the meaning of this?! Why has the match begun?! We're still deliberating!"

"My apologies, Your Majesty! I came to you first thing and neglected to inform the other departments!" Elric fell into a panic. His hand trembled as he corrected his glasses, and he was about to race off somewhere when Duke Aurelia called him to a halt.

"Calm down. Whatever the case, let's confirm the facts."

"A match can't just be suspended once it's begun. Not even by order of the king. What we must do right now is gather information and decide on our policy so we can swiftly handle the matter the moment this match is settled."

In response, Duke Aurelia nodded and pulled out a wand—Glámr-Sight, with an emerald tip and sugar maple shaft. This one had been custom-made; it was a little longer than the one Eduard used, and the image of a peacock was inlaid on the surface of the emerald in gold.

Duke Aurelia was also known as Long-Armed Ernst. This stemmed from his special ability to enhance the scope and range of the magic in his wands. In Aurelia's naval battles, his role was to launch powerful bombardments from beyond the horizon. The tools he used were all modified to make best use of his gift.

His eyes trained on the black dragon that had already taken off into the sky, Duke Aurelia swung the wand. While the magic circle that manifested over both his eyes was the same as with normal Glámr-Sight, it was joined with several others that stacked atop one another until it looked like he was wearing binoculars.

“Oh, I see. The source of the magic is the stirrup. It’s been hidden under several layers of concealment. I can see how he made it through the pre-match inspection.”

Those words took Erika by surprise. *Did August really cheat?* She didn’t want to think so and prayed it was all some sort of mistake.

“But that one’s harmless. At the very least, he is not illegally *enhancing* the dragon. The magic he’s using is Intoxicate.”

Intoxicate was a spell that bestowed upon its target the same effects as copious amounts of alcohol.

The king broke into a relieved smile. “Intoxicate? If that actually strengthened people, our bars would be overflowing with valiant warriors. Rather, I’m surprised he can handle a drunk dragon that splendidly.”

As the king had said, a drunken dragon was a dangerous beast one would do best to stay away from.

Duke Aurelia shrugged. “That being said, this is a problem. An Intoxicate spell still breaks the rules of the competition.”

“If he loses, we can keep our lips sealed and deal with it internally... but that black knight doesn’t look like he’ll go down so easily. Even with the shackles of Intoxicate holding him down.” The king thought for a while, giving a slow nod once he reached his decision. “Alright, let them continue. Look at the faces of the crowd. We’ll have a riot if we cut it short. Though unfortunately, even if the black knight wins, we cannot treat him as the victor.”

“You just want to watch the match, don’t you, sire?”

“Haha, was it that obvious?” The king mischievously smirked. However, he quickly made a more serious face before issuing orders to Elric. “You heard the meat of it, Elric. This is the message you will pass to the other departments: the spell is Intoxicate, and it is neither enhancing the dragon nor the rider. He presumably bought a cursed item by mistake, but even with that taken into consideration, the black knight has committed a violation. We will give a verdict once the match is decided. Wait patiently for now.”

“Understood.”

Elric bowed, slipped out of the VIP seats, and raced down the stairs. He nearly tripped as the crowd abruptly raised another ruckus. Erika, Henri, and Ernst blankly returned their gazes to the two dragons.

August and Louie had immediately broken into a complicated series of turns through the air as they scrambled to take the other's rear. It did seem Louie had the slight advantage, having more opportunities to launch an offense. However, while August was being pushed back, he gave his undivided attention to evading, and he had yet to take a single blow.

"As I expected, even Louie is having a hard time with the black knight. If his skills are equal to a seasoned veteran like Louie, then perhaps he's the son of some high noble who hid his face to take part," the king surmised.

August continued to move and dodge as if he had no blind spots at all. These were movements only permissible by Ignitia's dragoons, who could borrow the eyes of their dragons to take in their surroundings. The dragon could see through the human's eyes and the human through the dragon's, allowing them to compensate for each other's weaknesses. The greater one's mastery of riding, the clearer the image was conveyed and the longer one could maintain their shared sight.

However, even if their level of perception was equal, Camellia had the advantage when it came to strength. August had the upper hand in maneuverability, but as his mount lacked the speed, even if he took a sharp turn and tried to shake off his foes, they would immediately catch up and attack from above.

This difference in dragons of the same class came down to a difference in rearing. Blackcurrant was a generic-purpose dragon reared by knights on shifts, while Camellia was raised by an affluent noble house who'd hired a full team of staff to look after her. Her superiority was simply inevitable.

"Still, I find it hard to believe that a mere difference in environment accounts for Camellia's supremacy... Though I guess it wouldn't be strange for the Ode-Ignitia House to hide a secret or two on how to raise a strong dragon," said the king, tilting his head.

Despite riding a dragon with lesser abilities, August continued to dodge.

Additionally, the times when August would take the rear and attack were gradually increasing. He had managed to overturn a physical disadvantage with technique alone.

In response, Louie's white dragon was trying to trip up Blackcurrent with her tail and wings more often. He was gradually growing more underhanded as the match went on. By contrast, August took whatever chance presented itself with fluid, efficient movements.

The crowd would boo with each of Louie's attacks and cheer with each of August's. The prince certainly had a natural talent for charming people. Erika determined, then and there, that she would throw her garland for August whether he won or lost.

Bit by bit, Camellia's turns grew duller. Her fatigue was evidently accumulating after being forced into so many unreasonable maneuvers. This continued until the balance crumbled and Louie had changed from hunter to hunted.

August stuck his black dragon firmly behind Louie, aiming for a gap in his defenses. The instant Camellia staggered, coming out of a rotation, he thrust.

Erika was sure the match had finally been decided, only for Louie to rip off his mantle and toss it at August's face at the last second.

This tactic, just barely within the scope of the rules, filled the air with boos and jeers. But Louie attacked, paying absolutely no mind to the vilification raining down upon him.

His thrust had no speed behind it, so Blackcurrent avoided it easily, but what he did manage to do was tangle up August's spear and snatch it away. As he barreled past, Louie aimed for an extra bonus, sending his dragon's tail lashing out at the black knight's face to sweep him off his mount.

A metallic clang echoed through the arena. The black helmet fell to the ground, bent out of shape. The crowd cried out.

Having narrowly avoided Louie's cheap shot, the black knight was still on his dragon. But the price he paid was too great.

The blond hair contained by the helmet floated up as it was exposed to the

breeze. His skin, as white as alabaster, was revealed to all who saw him. Completely mismatched with his crude, black armor, a boy as petite and elegant as a young girl appeared from within.



4

The moment August's identity was revealed, Louie stopped in his tracks. He lifted his visor, grinned sadistically, and said something, though he was much too far away for Erika to hear it.

August gritted his teeth to withstand what had most definitely been an insult.

The crowd, meanwhile, had yet to decide on the right reaction to the black knight's true identity. Should they consider August a skilled dragoon unlike what the rumors had to say? Or should they interpret all of the black knight's deeds to be a malevolent deception?

Erika couldn't tell which way things would go.

"Could it be...? Is that really August? Is that black knight our son?"

"Yes, there's no doubt about it, dear. That's our August," the queen firmly declared with a soft smile. Up until a moment ago, she had been watching in silence. She placed her palm over the king's shaking hand.

"So, our August finally managed to ride... And how daringly, how elegantly he soars through the skies."

"Of course. He is our child, the rightful heir of Ignitia."

"I believed. By God, I believed. But I never thought my heart would tremble like this when the proof was presented before me."

"I feel the same way."

"But Lord, how cruel fate must be. My son has performed such praiseworthy feats, yet I must chide him for his transgression and declare his defeat." The king hung his head. "If only he hadn't flown at the sacred joust... If only the dragon he rode wasn't Blackcurrant with an enchanted stirrup!"

The queen used her handkerchief to wipe away the tears streaming down her husband's face even as her own continued to flow. These were not only tragic tears to lament the twists of fate; they were tears of heartfelt delight that their son had proven his ability to ride a dragon.

Unfortunately, word spread among those who didn't know the real August—the onlookers who were familiar with the prince of scandals—and soon, curses and looks of disdain were being cast his way. While August was surrounded by these venomous voices, Louie brandished his spear.

The situation had turned on its head, and now the crowd was cheering for Louie. The boy grinned wide as he ordered Camellia to close in on the prince.

Blackcurrent's balance crumbled as she avoided Camellia's body blow. Taking his chance, Louie unleashed his spear. Sparks flew as its metal tip glanced off the edge of August's sword.

It was close, but August had drawn his sword just in time.

Even an amateur like Erika could tell that Louie's childish attack had been meant to draw blood. As it stood, he was four years older than his foe, and his merciless onslaught came from a higher elevation.

"He parried? Possible in a match of spears, perhaps, but with a sword?" Duke Aurelia groaned as he watched the tense exchange. Barring coincidence, it would have been generally impossible.

In battles between dragoons, the larger the dragons were, the higher their relative velocity and the worse their maneuverability. In a twenty-meter-class match, the skills necessary to parry an attack were beyond comparison to any of the lower classes.

Additionally, having larger dragons made it more difficult for the dragoons to close in on each other. There was an instinctive understanding that even the slightest contact could easily lead to being dismounted, which put weapons with smaller reach at an overwhelming disadvantage.

Over the joust's long history, only three people had ever triumphed in the twenty-meter class after losing their spear. And it was not as if those three had won through pure swordsmanship alone.

"The established practice is to keep taking attacks with the dragon's scales until the spear eventually breaks, but it looks like he has other plans."

Once his tears had dried, the king's eyes were fixed on August so firmly that he didn't even dare to blink.

As of yet, August was still at a stark disadvantage. Louie continued a one-sided assault without giving him a chance to breathe, and August had no means of counterattacking.

“Is it possible for him to turn things around from here?” Erika asked.

“Don’t worry; just keep watching. If August has learned anything from all the jousts he’s watched in his life, he’ll surely have noticed the move he must make. And he has the skills to pull it off.”

At the king’s urging, Erika remained focused on the match.

The next moment was when the stalemate would take a turn. The moment she thought Louie had struck the shield on August’s chest, August diverted its course ever so slightly so that it slid between his arm and flank. Getting to work at once, he wrapped his left arm around it.

At first, it looked like a reckless game of tug of war. As August refused to drop his sword, surely Louie, who was gripping his spear in both hands, had the advantage. However, in that same motion, August had tangled Blackcurrent’s reins around the spear shaft.

Blackcurrent gave her head a forceful shake. Any resistance Louie could offer proved ineffective, and his spear was snatched away by the combined efforts of man and dragon.

After putting some distance between them, August tossed the stolen lance aside. Now it was sword on sword—an even match.

“You did it! I’m glad you remembered, August. That’s the move that won the ten-meter-class’ semifinals three years ago!” the king cried cheerfully. Before he knew it, he was clenching his fists. While he had just been lamenting fate, the sight of August’s accomplishment had brought his spirits right back.

“His Highness Prince August has the advantage in pure riding skill, while Louie has the upper hand in experience and physique. Now that it’s become more difficult to rely on the dragons’ abilities, I’d say the match is fifty-fifty.”

“You’d better be bloody well prepared to take on my son in a battle of attrition. He’s way more trained than he looks!”

Erika recalled how August had easily lifted up her heavy leather bag and how stable his steps had been when they danced. August had ceaselessly worked to train his body in preparation for the fateful day when he would ride a dragon.

Now that he had lost his spear, Louie shifted his strategy. He had Camellia take distance as he raised his sword in a defensive stance.

But August's response was one no one had expected. Blackcurrent began to climb higher and higher. The expression on August's face was so fearless, it was clear he was not running away. The spectators fell silent as they watched him.

Under so many watchful eyes, August had Blackcurrent do a loop with the sun at her back. The silhouette of the dragon and dragoon was overwritten by its radiance. It was a sight so brilliant it sealed every eye shut, and in that instant, August made his move.

After a strong flap, Blackcurrent switched to a dive. Her wings were folded in to reduce air resistance; her attack stance resembled the focused descent of a kingfisher or a falcon.

For a moment, Louie simply stared dumbfounded at Blackcurrent's rapid approach. At this rate, the two dragons would collide. His choices were to either evade or intercept, but August didn't give him the chance to decide.

Like thread intertwining, Blackcurrent slickly slid around Camellia as she failed to get away. After this narrow pass, the black dragon skimmed the ground for a sudden brake, spreading out her wings to slow to a hover.

Louie was left out in the air. He didn't turn around as August was sheathing his sword. Six fragments of wood fluttered haphazardly to the ground. Every shield fastened to Louie and Camellia had been split in two.

It was as if August had passed a string through a series of stationary needles while riding a horse at full speed. With this astounding precision, August had torn through Louie's defenses.

Soon, Camellia landed with her rider in a stupor. The stadium was still silent.

As everyone gaped at August, their faces made it clear they couldn't believe what they had just seen. The only sound was the beating of Blackcurrent's wings.

And through this stillness, Erika alone moved. She picked up the garland prepared for her and tossed it his way.

August lightly patted Blackcurrent on the neck. His trusty steed immediately understood his intention, spreading her wings out wide and rising into the air. Blackcurrent skimmed the top of the crowd, allowing August to catch the ring of flowers in midair.

Erika waved her hand, and August waved back with his ribbon-adorned arm.

Finally, the referee returned to his senses and raised the flag to signal August's victory. The cheers that resounded were great enough to shake the earth. The stadium was filled with the claps and cheers of passionate onlookers.

Erika continued throwing garlands one after the next, and the rider and dragon who faithfully caught every one of them were soon bedecked with vibrant flora.

Most importantly, August had proven his innocence. After witnessing riding skills that harkened back to those of ancient kings and heroes, the people would surely accept him.

That's one thing off the table. Erika breathed a sigh of relief.

Evidently, he had made it clear whether he could ride a dragon or not. Even if he was disqualified, if it was explained that he hadn't actually done anything unfair, the populace would continue to accept him henceforth.

"August! My son! My little hero!"

The king had jumped up onto the handrail, spreading his arms wide. August responded with a wave, and the two of them shared a beaming smile.

Blackcurrent, meanwhile, did a loop, a tailspin, and various other acrobatic maneuvers to answer the applause. In the midst of this sideshow, as man and dragon climbed high one last time to perform the move that would ultimately conclude the finals, something dreadful happened.

"Mrrhee!"

Blackcurrent let out a bitter whimper. At such a high altitude, the black dragon suddenly began thrashing in pain and whipping around August on her

back. It was almost as if she was trying to shake him off.

Erika had a terrible feeling about this, like an ice-cold hand was stroking her back.

It can't be... No, he's come so far. He can't fall now.

Her anxiety hit the mark as Blackcurrent began to gyrate like a black tornado. She was now far more violent than she had been in the match. Her crude movements completely disregarded the fact she had a rider.

The boy in black armor was tossed out into the air. He wasn't even flinching; all the whips and turns must have rendered him unconscious.

As he fell defenselessly through the air, Blackcurrent should have been the first one to come to his aid, and yet she wouldn't even look at him.

"August!" Erika found herself screaming. That was all she could do.

The queen also cried his name, her voice more desperate than anyone else's. The king called for his own dragon to catch the boy, but he was far too late.

Only Duke Aurelia moved forward with purpose, as if time were flowing differently for him. He opened his leather alchemist bag and took out a Feather Fall wand. However, this was no ordinary Feather Fall wand—it was engraved with a verse in ancient Aurelian extolling the wind, and it had undergone various methods to increase its effective range. It was a wand for him, and him alone.

The duke concentrated on the falling August, took aim, and swung. A spell that would normally reach no more than five meters, through the ability of the best alchemist in the world, deployed more than a hundred meters away.

When the faint, white, membranous magic circle came into contact with August's body, it broke into miniscule fragments and scattered.

It was as if August, along with his disheveled garlands, had forgotten that gravity existed. He fell for an astoundingly long long time; every second seemed to drag out. The scene of him falling through the white, magic lights made it look like his feathers were being plucked away.

The angel who had dreamed of flying had seen everything taken from him the

moment his wish had come true, and in the end, he was left crawling on the dirt.

Chapter 3: The Angel's Crypt

1

After August fell, all sorts of people raced around to investigate and seize control of the situation. In the gaps between his ceremonial speeches, the king issued direct orders to his subordinates, making sure they controlled whatever information was spreading and looked into the truth. The queen left to negotiate with Lucanlandt's nobles in person and to procure a skilled, tight-lipped healer. Their guard dragons secretly lurked around the stadium, and through their eyes and ears, the royal couple searched for any suspicious individuals.

Duke Aurelia reclaimed the enchanted equipment from Blackcurrent and began analyzing the magic.

As the curtain fell on this magnificent joust, many were moving around in its shadows.

Erika led Tirnanog to the front of the tent where August had been brought for treatment. The tent was surrounded by royal guards, who made sure no one could approach. Naturally, Erika was no exception.

They were there to prevent any misinformation from getting out as a means to protect August. However, the stadium was already rife with irresponsible speculation and terrible slander.

The crown prince had stolen someone's dragon to enter the tournament. He had equipped a sacred dragon with a suspicious magic item. He'd fallen from the dragon once his win was determined to be illegitimate—a fitting end for an illegitimate child.

In an attempt to keep the rumors in check, the king wouldn't allow anyone near the tent. However, this only allowed ambiguous information to fester.

Animosity toward August was gradually spreading.

“Erika, what do you plan to do now?”

“Honestly I... don’t know what to do. I’m sorry, Tir.”

“Got it. Just tell me if you need my strength. I’ll wait for you.”

Feeling pressured by this unsavory air, Erika desperately tried to think of something she could do. She detested the thought of not doing anything at all. However, as she continued to deliberate without taking a single step, time cruelly continued marching on.

How long had it been? Erika heard a number of people quarreling inside.

“You can’t move yet, Your Highness! It’s too dangerous!”

“Let go of me! I need to be the one... to explain it to Father!”

“Stay still! It’s in your best interest to—”

August emerged from the tent flap. As a soldier and healer kept him at bay, he noticed Erika.

“Hello, Your Highness.”

“Is that you, Erika?”

August had removed his armor and was now clad only in normal riding clothes. His right hand clenched the blue ribbon Erika had conceded to him.

After staring at Erika awhile, the strength suddenly drained from his body, and he looked away with bitterness on his face.

“Let her in.”

“But, Your Highness, His Majesty said not to let anyone—”

“I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens. Please.”

Reluctantly, the soldier guided Erika into the tent. The inside was partitioned with a curtain. The area closest to the entrance was the healer’s room, which contained medicine boxes as well as mortars and other tools to mix drugs. There was a desk littered with quite a few sheets of parchment.

The healer headed for his desk and began writing something, though not before reemphasizing August’s need for rest.

As for the inner room, it only had a simple bed and a few chairs. August took a seat on the bed while Erika pulled up a chair.

With a troubled smile on his face, August was at a complete loss for what to say. Erika resolved to start the conversation.

“You promised me you wouldn’t fly.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I didn’t come here to condemn you.”

“Yeah, but still. I’m sorry. You were worried that something like this would happen, weren’t you?”

August smiled softly, but Erika could tell there was suffering and regret twisting and turning beneath that thin layer of skin. This time, she was the one who didn’t know what to say. The silence that came as she attempted to choose her words was hard on her heart. Once she could no longer bear it, she decided to shift the topic.

“I saw you were protected from the fall, but did you get any injuries when you were being thrown around?”

“No, I’m perfectly fine. I’m not sure if I was lucky or if Blackcurrant was being gentle.”

“I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Hahaha. When I try to surprise people a bit, look where that gets me. Good grief. Serves me right.” August mocked himself and forced a cheerful laugh. “It was the first time, you know. The first time I ever met a dragon apart from Goldberry who wasn’t afraid of me. ‘I can fly if it’s with her,’ I thought, but it looks like I was wrong.”

August looked at the ceiling and sighed. His gaze was fixed far beyond the canopy; he was staring out at the blue skies above. The same skies that should have belonged to him only a few moments before.

“How did it feel?”

“Better than I’d ever dreamed. I just knew that it was where I belonged. It was like every drop of my blood had become part of the dragon. My skin still

remembers the sensation of our wings striking the wind.”

“Must have been something.”

“Yes, it really was. But alas. When I think about how that dragon is now afraid of me, how we’ll never fly together again, it feels like half my body has been torn to shreds.”

He laughed powerlessly, and instead of shedding tears, he cast his eyes down and furrowed his brow. Erika found herself terrified at the realization that this was the greatest expression of sorrow he could muster. What would become of him if he found out the general public believed he was the one who made a mockery of the tournament?

The rails that would lead August to the Beast of Contracts—and Erika to her demise—were gradually being laid out.

All of a sudden, the fragmentary information clicked into place. Dragons feared August. Intoxicate magic. Hadn’t Blackcurrent been fine around August precisely because she had been intoxicated? Presumably, the state had been dispelled after the finals, and she had regained her fear.

Did it dissolve naturally, or did someone set this up?

She was so close to understanding, but there was still something missing; this was a terrible, tantalizing feeling.

The two silently stared at one another, each thinking things through in their own way, when a ruckus came from outside the tent.

“What could it be?” Erika asked.

“Oh no. The noisy one came,” August replied.

The one who forcefully threw back the curtain was Louie. He lorded over August, his smile brimming with a sense of superiority. He was still in the armor he’d worn during the match, and he was decorated with so many garlands that it took no more than a glance to recognize him as the victor.

“Oh, Your Highness! Such a shame it all had to come to this!”

He spoke the same rude, rash remarks even when August was present. After barging in uninvited, he dragged over a chair and took a seat right in front of

the prince.

“Hello, Louie. I heard you won. That’s incredible.”

“It was nothing. Why should I have expected any less?”

He spread his arms in a grandiose display, triumph written all over his face.

“I’ve also heard some interesting rumors. They say your dragon was equipped with an illegal magic item. I figured you were up to some skulduggery.

Otherwise, there’s no way you could have stood against me. Really, just when I thought I had found a worthy rival... What. A. Shame.”

“A magic item? Not to sound rude, but I don’t know anything about that.”

“Don’t play dumb, August. Even babies sucking on their mommies’ teats know you can’t ride a dragon through normal means. Hey, where did you get such a convenient tool? Was it from Aurelia? Karkinos?”

Louie was getting more and more into his tirade. His opinion of August was formed from labels and libels, and it was unbearable to listen to.

“Lord Louie, we still don’t know the specifics of the magic item used. My father and other specialists are investing all their time and effort into analyzing it. You are in a position with some responsibility, so please do not frivolously spread unsubstantiated information.”

Erika thrust herself into their conversation. It was then that Louie noticed her presence for the first time. For a moment, he stared at her, shocked. Immediately after, a vile smile graced his lips.

“What do we have here? If it isn’t that girl from Aurelia. I see... So that’s how it is.”

“I don’t know what you’re misunderstanding, but Erika and I are friends.”

“Hmm? The way you deny it just makes it more suspicious.” Surely finding something to be simply hilarious, Louie raised his voice and laughed. “Ahahaha. I can’t underestimate you. With that lustful blood running through your veins, you even laid hands on such a young—”

“You can’t keep your insults to me? You mean to besmirch her—and even my mother?!”

August lifted his clenched fist, but he didn't go any further. At the very last moment, his rationality took hold. Louie took on an exaggerated cowering pose before continuing his diatribe.

"You turn to violence the moment you know you can't win with words! This is what you get when you mix a lowlife and a harlot: the worst sort of mongrel!"

August's eyes shimmered like violet fire.

"You're right, Louie. I'm sorry. Violence is going too far."

"Glad you understand. Good on you. I'm doing this for your sake, August. Just think of what would happen if you punched me now. They'd all think you were a shameless wretch who punched the victor in retaliation for your foul play being revealed."

"I guess you're right."

August loosened his hand and calmly reached it to his belt, right to where his sword hilt would be. However, his sword had been removed, scabbard and all, to administer treatment.

Erika watched Louie, mouth agape. Louie had reached down to his own belt and grabbed his own sword.

"August! Louie! What are you—"

"Erika, please. Keep quiet. This is between him and me," August said with a smile. A cruel tint had found its way into his eyes. "Now, Louie, is that all? We don't see each other nearly often enough. I'll hear anything you have to say."

"Of course I have more. Aren't you ashamed to be a member of the royal family when you can't even fly at your age? Oh, that's right, silly me. You don't even have a single drop of Ignitia's blood in you!"

"Hmm. Anything else?"

August slowly raised his right hand, pantomiming the act of drawing a sword. Louie was like a mirror, drawing his blade with exactly the same motions.

Erika felt a chill run down her spine. It was like August was controlling him. Louie was so focused on sneering at August, he had yet to even notice he had drawn his sword.

“You’re the bastard of a harlot, August! You’re not even royalty, yet they call you the crown prince! You plan to end Ignitia’s prestigious pedigree in your generation? Hey, I’ll be king for you, so you can be my retainer! I’ll send you out to some backwaters so you can bore yourself to death! Just like your father did to mine!”

August placed his unseen sword against his throat. Louie did the same with his real one. A drop of blood slid down its sleek surface.

“That’s right, that father of yours who tolerates his whore wife and his bastard son is a criminal himself, you know! You think such a crime should be overlooked just because he calls himself king?! The fact that he hasn’t disowned you yet is the highest form of treason!”

“Hmm. Is that the royal blood I hear so much about? It doesn’t look so different to me.”

“What? What are you... What’s this? Why is my sword...? Huh? It hurts!”

Louie’s face turned pale when he finally realized something was off. A cruel smile crossed August’s face as he drank in Louie’s dismay.

“You were always making *such* a big deal about it, so I was sure it would have quite a spectacular color. I got my hopes up for nothing.”

“I can’t move! My arm won’t listen to me! Wait, please... Someone, stop my hand! Anybody?! Save me! I’m about to be killed by myself!”

“Hey now, what are you talking about, Louie? It just goes to show that unlike you, your hand knows how to do the right thing. What are you so distraught about?”

The soldier and doctor in the tent had already collapsed to the ground. It was like they were being bound by invisible rope, their arms and legs firmly pressed together.

August put more power into his hand. Louie’s sword dug deeper into his throat.

“You can only blame yourself, Louie. You’re the one who made me this angry.”

“You can’t! August!” Erika desperately squeezed out her voice, causing August to turn. He stared at her in a daze, like something had left him.

The sword clattered to the floor.

Louie sobbed, crawling on the ground as he held his wound. From what Erika could see, he wasn’t bleeding too heavily, and his life was not in danger.

Great. She breathed a sigh of relief upon confirming he was still alive. If he’d ended up killing Louie, surely August would’ve been terribly wounded as well.

“Erika... what did I just do?”

“August—”

“Ah, I see. This... this thing isn’t human power. It’s not a power any human should have. This is an ability that tramples over human dignity.”

“You’re wrong, August!”

“No, I’m not wrong. I’m hopeless. Whether I’m my father’s child or not, I can’t be king. I can’t be... anyone...”

Covering his face with one hand, August staggered away from Erika.

I can’t leave him alone like this.

Erika tried to chase after him, only for Louie, the soldier, and the healer to rise from the floor and spread their arms into a wall. Their eyes were hollow.

“Lord Louie, please move!”

“No, no, no... I-I can’t... be any...”

“Can’t be king... Can’t be king... Can’t be king...”

“Not human, not human, not human...”

They muttered delirious, disjointed words. Their movements were stiff like those of marionettes. And in the time they held Erika up, August escaped from the tent.

“August! Wait for me!”

“I’m sorry, Erika. Thank you for being so kind to me. But you can’t get close to me anymore... Goodbye.”

Erika pushed the puppets aside and ran out after him. However, she was met by chaos incomparable to what she had seen inside the tent.

The crowds had turned into flocks of dolls with hollow eyes. Hundreds—no, thousands—of people swayed uncannily back and forth as they walked in rank and file. Their faces were all uniform masks devoid of any emotion, their mouths muttering senseless drivel.

Erika was reminded of zombie movies she had seen in a life gone by. But these were living people who were presumably being manipulated by some sort of mind control.

The area was dotted here and there by Aurelians resistant to this sort of magic and Hafan's high-ranking magicians with strong magical defense who seemed to have maintained their sanity. However, owing to the army of puppets that filled the space, there was nowhere they could go.

Within the river of people, one group stood out: a flock of dragons surrounding August. The dragons continued to gather, some flying overhead, others walking beside him. Unsteady on their feet, they didn't seem to be quite *there*; their faces were lax as though they were wading through a dream.

Among them, only Goldberry was normal, but she remained perched on August's shoulder. It looked like she was trying to comfort and console him.

"August!"

He did not heed her call. Instead, he continued on his way with his dragons. The walls of controlled humans and beasts kept Erika at bay, and soon, August was gone.

2

August was gone, the dragons were gone, and the soulless husks moving like dolls lurched ever closer. At first, Erika cowered from their empty expressions and the way they tottered toward her like zombies. However, she was relieved to see that they didn't attack or eat humans like their horror-movie counterparts.

Looks like they're not a direct threat to my life, but I need to be careful.

If she got dragged into the torrential flow, there was no telling where she would be swept off to. As a matter of fact, a number of people, presumably from Aurelia, who had maintained their sanity had already been carried out of sight by the brainwashed legion.

Thankfully, they seemed to have some direction, ensuring that there were no pileups and that no one was trampled.

“Huh? Come to think of it, where’s Tir?”

She finally noticed he was nowhere in sight. Tirnanog was stronger than the average human and quite a bit smaller. He could slip through the gaps in the crowd, so it was hard to imagine he’d been washed away. Not to mention, he had left Erika’s leather bag behind.

Wait, did he follow August with the other dragons? It would not be easy to reunite with him in this chaos.

As Erika watched from the safety of the shadows, she took note of a few figures shifting from rooftop to rooftop. Judging by their attire, she took them to be Hafan magicians.

Oh, I see. There’s only a risk of getting carried away if you’re on the ground.

Erika tried to emulate them. All she had to do was get up to where the masses couldn’t reach her. She rummaged through her bag, searching for a Levitate or Jump wand.

I’ll need to pick the right wands to find August and Tir too.

As Erika was busy choosing out her wands, she suddenly heard a voice from above.

“I finally found you, Erika. I’m glad you’re alright.”

She looked up to see her father and a squad of alchemists behind him.



The moment August’s mental breakdown brought about the chaos, Duke Aurelia was busy with his team analyzing the enchanted artifact collected from Blackcurrent. They only noticed something was amiss when their magicians began collapsing one after the next.

Their symptoms resembled the effects of powerful, perpetual mind-altering magic.

Recognizing that the stirrup was the least of their worries, Duke Aurelia put the analysis on hold and moved to get a proper grasp on the situation. He delegated intel gathering to a majority of his staff, then led a detached squad to ensure the safety of the king, the queen, and Duchess Hafan.

Duchess Hafan, meanwhile, had put her efforts toward safeguarding an unconscious royal couple and their children, among other nobles. Once her energy had been sapped, she herself collapsed. After meeting up with her, Duke Aurelia took over this duty.

His investigation uncovered that the entirety of Ynys Negesydd had been placed under the effects of the mind-altering magic. Without dragons, the only way off the island was by boat or bridge, so evacuating all of the capital's people to safety was not a realistic solution.

As it was on the outskirts, where the effects of this attack were weaker, House Aurelia's villa was designated a refuge. Thus, the duke started out by securing a safe route to his quarters. After that, he formed a number of teams in charge of directing the manipulated mob, treating injuries, dealing with fires, and patrolling to find those who were unaccounted for.

It was on one of those patrols that Duke Aurelia coincidentally came across his daughter, Erika, and she was consequently evacuated to the villa.

The room she was ordered to wait in contained Duchess Hafan and Anne, who had used up all their mana resisting the magic. Alongside them were the royal family, along with Tricia, Marquia, and other noble ladies who had been taken under Duke Aurelia's protection. They had all been lulled into a magical sleep for their own safety.

"There's no guarantee some shameless ruffian won't try to take advantage of the confusion. With this, they're at least safe for the time being. Erika, please stay here until the ruckus dies down."

"But, Father! I am the daughter of a duke! This is precisely the sort of situation where I must fulfill my duty."

“Correct, and we need someone to protect the people here.”

Erika had concealed her true desire to search for August, only for her words to be used against her, tying her down. She took a glance at the unconscious Anne and the rest. How could she say no when presented with these women in such a defenseless state?

“Erika, were you with Prince August when it happened?” Duke Aurelia asked softly upon seeing his daughter with her head hung and her mouth sealed tight. As she struggled to find an answer, he peered into her face and gave a smile to pep her up. “Don’t worry. We’ll find August and protect him.”

“I can’t.”

“There’s a lot of chaos, but nothing life-threatening. Rest at ease.”

While gentle, Duke Aurelia’s tone was an imperative that wouldn’t take no for an answer. After that, he rose and exited the room.

What do I do? Erika panicked. She had prepared for various scenarios, yet reality had managed to exceed them. It would have been far easier if she just got into a full-on battle with the beast.

Using her leather bag as a chair, she stared absentmindedly at the ceiling in a bout of escapism. And there she stayed, frozen, until she was brought back to her senses by an unusual rattling at the window.

“What are you doing here, Erika? I was looking for you.”

Tirnanog waved his hands from beyond the glass. Erika raced up in a panic and threw the window open.

The black dragon was surprisingly nimble in his heavy armor. While small, he boasted such monstrous strength she had to wonder if it was any lower than when he was his original size.

“Tir, where did you go?”

“Naturally, I followed the blond, princey boy, just as we arranged. I pinned down the place with a beast’s presence.”

“Pardon?”

“Have you forgotten? This was your plan, you know. After the blond prince fell from his dragon, it was my job to secretly tail him and find out where this Beast of Contracts was hiding. Am I mistaken?”

Thanks to everything that had gone wrong, Erika had completely forgotten her promise with Tirnanog. That certainly *had* been the initial plan. She had neither told him to suspend nor continue, and in the midst of the confusion, Tirnanog had followed August on his own.

“That’s amazing! Nicely done!”

“Bwahaha. Praise me more. I am a very useful guardian. The most useful, you could say.”

“I knew you could do it, Tir! You’re so cool! Now that that’s settled, let’s go raid its den and bring this mess to an end!”

“Just what I was hoping for! Leave it to me. No matter what monster appears, it is powerless before my might and wisdom!”

Erika passed over her combat bag, wrapped a belt with a wand holster over the reserved dress she’d donned to watch the joust, and prepared herself for battle.

Her spirits had been lifted by this unexpected spout of good news. Thanks to that, she had completely forgotten where she was and who might be around her.

“Err, Erika, dearest. That golem—no, that monster—might it be the nameless monster we all know and love?”

Erika timidly turned to a voice from behind. Anne had woken up without her realizing and was looking at her rather dubiously.



“Wh-Why, Anne, I’m glad you’re in good health.”

“Since we left the epicenter of the magical attack, it looks like my magic resistance is enough to block its effects. For a while, I intentionally dropped the mana I put into resistance to zero and let myself fall unconscious. Thanks to that, I’ve preserved quite a bit of mana.”

“How wonderfully executed.” Erika smiled, making sure her fluster couldn’t be discerned, but Anne’s eyes remained as harsh as ever.

“More importantly, I see a golem whose shape, magical composition, and voice resemble that monster. Is there anything you want to tell me about it?”

“Heavens, no! This is just a normal golem, Anne. Right, Tir?”

“I-I am golem. Move. Fight. Go round and round.”

Tirnanog stuck out his hands, stiffly pacing back and forth like a toy robot.

“Are you sure about that? He’s still limping from the Scorching Ray I shot through his thigh.”

“You’re kidding me. I thought it was just hard to move in the armor! I’m so sorry; I didn’t notice!”

“Don’t worry, Erika. I completely regenerated it when I was hunting you down. There is nothing wrong with me.”

“Knew it,” Anne coldly declared.

Erika noticed how easily she had fallen for Anne’s trap. *You’re a natural at this. Delightfully devilish.* She silently praised the girl while giving up on trying to trick her. Evidently, she was getting more than she’d bargained for.

“If you could, please keep it a secret.”

“The woman I revere as if she were my older sister is working with a mysterious life-form who has no qualms about attacking people. The way she speaks and acts is terribly suspicious, and I just know she’s going to get up to something dangerous. Erika, would you keep silent if you were in my shoes?”

“Can’t we work something out?”

“Hold on, Erika. Leave this to me.” Tirnanog took a step toward Anne.

“Daughter of Magicians... nay, Anne. If you mean to get in our way, you leave me with little choice in the matter.”

“Oh? And what are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned about. I’ll just have you sleep for a while. Your life isn’t in danger.”

“You’re finally showing your true colors. Get away from Erika!”

Tirnanog flashed his sharp talons, and Anne raised her staff. Erika hurriedly stepped between them.

“Hey, how about you two settle down!”

“Fret not, Erika. It will be over in an instant. Of course, I won’t leave a scar.”

“Don’t think I’m the same as I was back then. This time, I’ll obliterate you in one shot.”

“Just settle down! Anne is my friend, Tir, you can’t attack her!”

“Hmph.”

Tirnanog obediently toned down his intimidation.

“Let me introduce you. He’s called Tirnanog now, and he’s my guardian beast. I will need his cooperation to resolve the matter of this mind-altering magic.”

“You’re going to... resolve this?”

Anne relaxed her staff, staring at Erika with a troubled, conflicted look on her face.

“A friend of mine is at the root of this case. I can’t tell you the specifics yet, but the point is, I have to get going. Or else.”

“I see you’ve stuck your head into something troublesome again.”

“I don’t think my life’s on the line this time. Don’t worry.”

Her reassurance only made Anne look more and more fretful. Erika was a year older than her, and she had seemed mature at first, but Anne knew just how reckless she could be.

“Are you talking about that prophecy again?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, that’s not it. It just feels like some part of you—your survival instinct, perhaps—is broken.”

Erika reflected on her actions thus far. She was definitely unlucky and shallow. Come to think of it, in her past life, she had often been told she had absolutely no sense for danger.

“Be at ease, Anne. I’ll protect Erika no matter what. Having fought me, you should know my strength better than anyone.”

Anne stared through the helmet, straight into Tirnanog’s eyes. He returned a somewhat confident look. Eventually, the girl lost the intense staring match and let out a sigh.

“Seriously, what am I supposed to do with you? Please run if it gets too dangerous.”

“I know, I know. I won’t do anything crazy this time around. You don’t have to worry.”

“You heard her, Mr. Tirnanog, but my dear sister will definitely do something absurd, so you have to protect her.”

“Leave it to me. I know how she works. That was already my intention.”

She gripped Tirnanog’s forearm in a handshake. Tirnanog gave her a firm nod.

“I wish I could join you, but with my feeble magic resistance, I’ll just get in the way. I’ll defend this place in your stead. Make sure you come back.”

“Of course I will,” Erika replied, her gaze sincere.

Tirnanog had already hopped onto the window ledge and was beckoning her out. Erika drew her Jump wand from the holster.

Its shaft was a bundle of reeds wrapped in a coiling spring. Its tip was a lodestone, and its wick contained one leg each from a grasshopper, a rabbit, and a frog. This was a wand that dramatically boosted its user’s ability to leap and bound.

If the Levitate wand was best suited for vertical movement, then the Jump

wand was made for horizontal movement. It was unusable where there were no footholds but perfect if she wanted to jump from roof to roof.

“May fortune be your guide.”

“Thank you Anne. Good luck to you too.”

“Follow me, Erika!”

“On it, Tir!”

Leaving Anne behind, Erika and Tirnanog jumped out into a capital ruled by chaos. They made for August, the boy at the center of it all.

3

“Tir, you’re certain this is where August is?”

“Indeed. Though it looks like some more gathered while I was retrieving you.”

From her rooftop position a short distance away, Erika peered at the Grand Cathedral. It bore an exaggerated magnificence, as though it were poised to pierce the heavens.

At present, a great number of dragons had gathered around the cathedral. The ones with wings circled above and perched on its steeples; the ones without tightly packed the plaza in front.

Compared to the ones that had paraded with August when the mind control had only just begun, these dragons looked even hollower. On closer inspection, she could pick out a few that had fallen unconscious.

“If the blond prince caused this mess, perhaps he holds a power that surpasses the domain of man,” Tirnanog said, sounding equally shocked and enamored.

“Come to think of it, Tir, when we’re under such strong magic, aren’t you having a tough time?”

“A foolish question. I don’t have it as bad as you lot, but I’m also Aurelian. I won’t let anyone reign over my soul without a fight.”

“That’s a relief.”

They stepped down to the plaza, and made their way toward the cathedral. If things got dangerous, she intended to use the Jump wand again to escape to higher ground. However, the movements of the dragons who tried to impede her were sluggish and dull, and she got around them quite easily. They grew even slower the closer she got to the door, and others still simply collapsed on the spot.

She entered with barely any trouble.

"I was expecting more resistance."

"Perhaps the prince himself wishes to be saved. Or perhaps even a dragon's heart can't stand this powerful pressure for so long."

"Then that's even more reason for us to pick up the pace."

"Right, let's hurry. The menacing presence is getting stronger. The stench of a beast fills the air."

They raced through the winding corridors, Tirnanog in the lead. While the smaller dragons had managed to make it inside, they were all out cold. Erika wondered whether they would come out of this unharmed.

If the dragons didn't follow him, does that mean he's alone?

As she drew closer, the display items shifted to the uncanny. It was a dreadful portrait of hell, as if to signify what lay ahead of her. Normally, these doors would be locked, but they had all been thrown open by August, who had come before her.

Erika remembered this path. She unconsciously found her hand brushing against her alchemist's silk glove and the wand holster just to make sure they were there. Just how well would her equipment serve to deal with this unanticipated situation?

"Even if you're not enough, you have me."

"Yes, that's what I'm counting on."

Erika pushed at the last door. In front of her towered the Grand Cathedral's sole depiction of God. A chill raced down her spine. It felt as if all the eyes of the grotesque sun were glaring angrily at her.

Directly in front of the mural of the One True God was Goldberry, lying motionless on the floor. Erika dashed up to her and confirmed she was still breathing. It seemed she had fallen into a deep sleep.

But August was nowhere to be seen. Considering Goldberry had fallen here, there was no doubt he'd been here not long ago. Where had he gone? Where *could* he have gone from this dead-end room?

"Erika, the prince's smell cuts off here. The beast's stench is so strong, I can't tell exactly where it's coming from."

"Let's see what we can find."

Erika opened her leather bag and first pulled out her Glámr-Sight wand. One swing deployed a faint, emerald-green circle around her eyes.

Unfortunately, while her eyes could now pick up mana, she did not see any suspicious traces of magic.

"It's not a magical mechanism?"

"This would have been so much easier with Urðr-Sight."

But, convincing herself there was little she could do about that, she concentrated on what she had on hand. She next produced a Magic Map wand. This wand could penetrate obstacles and elucidate the structure of a building to a certain degree. It came as a set with a parchment scroll pre-marked with grid lines.

The wand tip was magnetite etched with a relief of a compass. Its shaft was carved from the keel of a ship that had remained afloat for over ten years, and its wick was star crystal, faceted into the shape of a sextant. The end of its handle extended further in the form of a miniature anchor, cast from a real anchor that had been melted down.

A relatively new piece of technology, it was based on the Siren's Echo wand that old Aurelian sailors would use to detect hidden reefs. That wand had eventually been incorporated with the auto-scribing technique designed to mass-produce books.

"Shine of stars, light the way forth."

The wand's tip expelled a faint, yellow light as Erika gave it a swing. A circle of the same color spread out in front of her, and once it had reached a radius of about five meters, the magic sigils that formed the circle burst. Their fragments took the form of anchors and scattered in every direction.

Erika dipped the glowing wand tip in ink, then pressed it against the scroll, imprinting the compass' shape like a stamp. Much like the wand it came from, the compass began to give off a light of its own.

The anchors that had spread all across the room condensed on the compass mark and exploded in a flash of lightning. Ink raced across the parchment of its own accord, and in no time at all, the structure of her immediate surroundings had been drawn out.

"Found it. There's a hollow space between us."

"So it's not magic. Is it hidden mechanically?"

The hidden space was right underneath the mural of the One True God. Erika recalled the old song she'd heard from August: *"The beast must sleep beneath the sun."* Ignitia's God was indeed a sun god.

"The Beast of Contracts is below... but how did August get there?"

If I just had Urðr-Sight, Erika lamented once more. As she was clutching her head in her hands, Tirnanog walked out in front of the mural.

"Isn't this what you brought me for?"

"I guess you're right. We'll be in trouble if you break the mural, so please keep it to the floor."

"Leave it to me. If you would, Erika."

Erika nodded before chanting the command words that governed the armor of starsteel.

"Heed me, my cage! My shackles! My chains! Rest your bindings, and revive the memories sealed in black steel. Armor that hides the arms of a friend, let him show his gallant form!"

In accordance with her words, the armor surrounding Tirnanog's arms began to glow. By absorbing mana, starsteel could be shaped and formed endlessly,

and through Tirnanog's mana—or rather, the philosopher's stone's—it promptly took on a preset shape.

By the time the light dissipated, Tirnanog's arms were a size larger, their claws sharper and longer.

“Alright, have at it!”

“Grah!”

His hands swept like a black gale. With each swing, the sturdy stone floor was torn asunder and turned up. In ten seconds, he had opened a hole large enough for a human to pass through and revealed the stairs hidden beyond.

“This has to be the place. It's not just the beast's stench; I can sense a sinister magic.”

“Yes, I'm finally seeing it too.”

With her Glámr-Sight, she could see a black miasma of mana wafting through the air. She couldn't pick up any details, likely because it hadn't been given any direction. The air was simply filled with pure, high-density mana.

Fastening a star crystal lamp to her belt, she stuck a Feather Fall and Levitate wand into her holster just to be safe. With one step, and then another, she and Tirnanog descended the steep, narrow stairwell.

On either side of the spiraling steps were a number of open caskets. As the contents of one of them came into view, Erika was prepared for a shock. However, the coffin contained no body. It was stuffed to the brim with white flowers.

Every single one of them was engraved with a name. Founding King Guillaume, Savage King Jean... These two were revered monarchs whose names were carved deep into the nation's history.

“Is this a graveyard of kings?”

“No. Ignitia's dragon kings do not sleep below the earth. Once they die, they are returned to the sky.”

Historically, Ignitia's kings had no graves. These proud leaders would be consecrated through dragon burial. The king's body would be devoured by the

dragon they had ridden in life, and it was said that their souls would be as one forever.

The dragons that ate kings would become the eternal flying tombs of their beloved riders. They would henceforth be called Thrones. For as long as they lived on, their kings' souls would soar through the heavens on their Thrones in the sky.

The Founding King's Throne, and the Throne of the Savage King who came after him, continued to fly. Therefore, Ignitia had no need for a mausoleum of kings.

At the bottom of the stairs, Erika reached the nethermost level of the cathedral. There was a single coffin left in front of the door, beyond which the Beast of Contracts lurked. It looked newer than the other ones, and it hadn't been filled with flowers yet.

Erika felt her blood run cold as she saw the name carved into it: August Ignitia. The very boy she was looking for. She hugged the wall beside the door, readying her wand as Tirnanog quietly swung it open.

The room inside was just a little narrower than the one that contained the mural, and it was roughly square. Its walls and floors were engraved with stylized eyes and eyelids. Apart from these carvings, there weren't any decorations of note; no paintings, statues, or furnishings.

A soft, orange light reminiscent of sunset poured down from overhead, and it was impossible to make out whatever ceiling may or may not have lain beyond it.

In the center of the room stood August, his back to the door.

4

"Please, tell me. Am I really my father's—King Henri's son?"

August's words filled the hidden room. Erika had been about to call out to him, but found herself frozen in place. For a moment, she thought that question had been meant for her, but August's eyes were focused elsewhere.

It was like he was talking to an invisible entity.

“Am I human? What is this power?” August continued his cross-examination with sincerity in his voice.

Erika couldn't see his face, and she couldn't hear whomever he was talking to.

“You always say only what I want to hear. You always say whatever's convenient for you. But I know you're a liar. The truth is twisted however you see fit. Yeah, I know. The truth is, my heart is weak. So weak that I could never believe a word you said. Maybe I'm just running away... from the truth, from myself. And from you.”

August paused and turned.

“You followed me all the way here, Erika.”

Only a moment ago, he had been pleading to someone with such miserable, desolate sorrow, but August's face was now plastered with a calm smile. Erika felt a strong disconnect between the two of them, but she forced herself to take a step closer.

“Let's go back, August. You can still make it in time.”

“I'll 'make it in time'? Then where am I going, and what will I arrive in time for?”

August's violet eyes wavered, and Erika couldn't find the right words to say.

“It's all over, all of it. It's not easy to dispel what's found its way into the human heart. I'll need great power to overturn the judgments I forced upon them, to throw out the doubts I stuffed down their throats... power strong enough to cause a miracle.” His voice cracked as he went on. “My mother, she always believed in me. My father, too; no matter what doubts they tried to breathe into him, he tried his best to believe. I wanted to achieve the results my parents hoped for. I wanted to be the August they wanted.”

Erika tried to imagine the pain August had endured from a very young age. *Just what was going through his head when he decided to turn to the forbidden arts?* A stranger who didn't know a thing could neither sympathize nor empathize.

However, that was irrelevant to her desire to prevent August's ruin. The way she saw it, precisely because she was an oblivious stranger, she could stick her nose where it didn't belong and stop him before it was too late.

"There's no reason for you to be a sacrifice for that wish."

"A sacrifice? Well, look at you, Erika. I guess you've seen through everything." August gave a shallow, self-deriding laugh.

"So you already knew how to find the beast?"

"I'm sorry. I guess I did lie to you."

"That's not what I want to talk about. I didn't come for an apology—"

"I've already made my decision, Erika." He spoke without hesitation. His smile changed to an ephemeral one that could be blown away in an instant. "Thank you for being my friend."

"Why do you have to say that? You make it sound as if we won't be friends anymore." Erika stopped herself before she could say, *"You make it sound like you're about to die. I don't have many friends to begin with, so it would be a real bother if you have to throw in the towel because of something like that."*

She wanted to ramble on, to distract him at least. Would she be better off instead marching up to him emotionally and forcing him to stop?

"Once my wish is granted, I won't be who I was before. So I'm glad I got to meet you one last time."

Something silver flashed in August's hand: a bizarre knife, curved like the claw of a carnivorous beast. He had inflicted a small cut on his own hand far faster than Erika or Tirnanog could reach him.

"If I can be granted just one tiny miracle, I want to be the me I should have been. Not the one standing here. A me brimming with confidence who never has to doubt himself. Who can ride a dragon freely through the skies. A me my father and mother can be proud of." A single drop of blood fell from his palm. "If I could have only that, then I don't need my heart—"

Before the drop could hit the ground, it disappeared, as if lapped up by an invisible tongue. August calmly closed his purple eyes.

“In accordance with our ancient pact, I offer the following to the guardian of my forefathers: my blood, my flesh, my soul, my everything, in exchange for one wish.”

The power drained from August’s body, and he collapsed with his face turned to the sky. At the same time, a flame erupted behind him. It blazed a brilliant red and rose until it was twice the height of a grown man.

A humanlike shadow flickered and swayed in the blaze. Two arms emerged from the tongues of the enraged inferno, catching August and holding him close.

“Foolish child... to torture yourself until your heart was in such a ragged state. Oh, but how ironic as well. To us beasts, the wounds etched into thine heart are what make thy soul beautiful beyond compare.”

The flames gradually shrank and condensed, revealing the figure hidden within them.

Heaps of glossy hair, golden with a touch of red, blooming outward like a lion’s mane. Lightly tanned skin reminiscent of desert sand. The heat of the flames became threads that stitched their way into a red, southern dress, while the light took shape as her golden ornaments.

There stood a beautiful, terrifying woman who gave off an untamed, ferocious air. She seemed young; she seemed old. She was mature and infantile all at once.

What most distinguished this woman from humankind was her eyes. They were completely different from when Erika had first met her; she now boasted golden eyes with vertical slits for pupils like some predatory feline.

Just the sight of her filled Erika with such tension and dread that she struggled to breathe. Yet this sight also elicited a fascination and a sense of security that comforted her heart.

The strange, contradictory impression this woman gave off cemented Erika’s belief that she was beyond human understanding.

“It really is you, Palug. So you’re the Beast of Contracts?”

The woman narrowed her eyes and smiled, which Erika took to be confirmation. There was definitely no mistaking her face, and the woman herself was admitting to it, yet Erika still couldn't believe she was the same person as that self-proclaimed demon.

Her whole aura was completely different from when they had met in front of the mural and on the palace terrace. Her true and monstrous nature had finally come to light. The longer Erika looked at her, the more she felt this woman might actually be a demon.

Her touch as gentle as if she were handling a fragile artifact, she lay August to rest on the floor. These gestures were filled with a sort of motherly love.

"Who'd have thought you would come all the way down here? Poor little Erika."

"If you're the Beast of Contracts, I'm begging you. Please don't make a contract with August."

Why was she the Beast of Contracts? If she really was, why had it taken so long to grant August's wish? Putting all these questions aside, Erika tried to persuade her. All that remained was for this ruinous contract to be fulfilled, and the only one who could do that—or choose not to—was the Beast of Contracts herself.

"If you fuse with August to make a contract, you'll go out of control in six years."

"I know."

"I don't know how exactly it works, but the beast—I mean, you—were unable to withstand the fusion with August."

"I know."

"Once you lose control, you might end up killing someone. Once he's separated from you, August will lose his ability to ride dragons. For good this time."

"I said I know."

Palug slowly turned toward Erika. Her demeanor had changed once again.

Erika's face was reflected back in dead, listless eyes.

"Wait! Erika! Not another step!"

"What?"

"Be careful. Even if she's human in form, don't think her heart beats the same as yours."

"But Palug is—"

A flash of light suddenly crossed Erika's vision. As Tirnanog landed, there was a scorch mark on his left gauntlet.

Palug's pose was slightly different from a few seconds before; her right arm was now extended. That was all Erika could see, but she understood that in that brief instant, some sort of exchange had happened between the two of them.

"Oh dear, what a perceptive snake. And I was ready to end it painlessly, before she knew what was going on."

"You finally revealed yourself, accursed vixen! I knew you were shady from the start!"

Tirnanog stood in front of Erika to defend her. Negotiations had broken down from the first sentence, and battle seemed unavoidable. But why was Palug trying to kill her? That part she couldn't understand.

"Tir, you knew from the start?"

"I told you not to be fooled. This woman is no demon; she's a breed of phantasmic beast. A divine beast, to be precise."

Palug shook her head. Her mane of golden hair swayed wildly like the artificial tresses of a kabuki actor. A pair of lion-like ears popped up atop her head, her arms were covered in a thin layer of gold fur, and her nails grew longer and sharper. A lion's tail slowly stretched out from the gap in her dress, which was open from her back to her hips. Her gold eyes glared at the two of them from the gaps in her disheveled hair.

"Vixen? Divine beast? What baseless accusations. Lowly snake, do you have knotholes for eyes?"

“Grrrrr! You vile woman, calling me a snake yet again!”

Tirnanog kicked off the floor, sending his body barreling at Palug. The moment his black claws were about to reach her, the flash of light deflected him again. Redirecting himself, he did a turn in the air, landing back at Erika’s side.

“I’m at a disadvantage. Erika, undo my restraints.”

“Right, on it!”

Erika issued an order to Tirnanog’s armor. When mana was poured into it, starsteel could be as malleable as gold or as hard as steel. This specific armor of starsteel had been given another function, made possible only by the abundant mana of a phantasmic beast.

“The cage is open, the shackles unwound, the chain falls to pieces. All bindings crumble to stardust. My art is an unseen hearth. My skill, an unseen mold. My law, an unseen anvil. My spell, an unseen hammer. Revive the memories sealed in black steel. Regain your true form, and shroud my friend. Armor of stardust!”

In concert with her commands, the armor glowed faintly with ancient words of Aurelian alchemists. Vast swathes of mana flooded into it from the philosopher’s stone embedded within Tirnanog’s soul. The starsteel armor crumbled into the shape of letters, swirling around the black dragon like flower petals swept up in a breeze.

As his true, liquid form was revealed, Tirnanog grew larger and larger. He expanded to the size of an elephant, his form gradually shaping into a dragon.

The starsteel dismantled into letters stuck fast onto the outer tissue of the same liquid body he had unveiled at the altar of the Seafarer’s Ruins. As they covered his body like fish scales, they let off a conspicuously stronger light.

Once the light had died down, the scale-like letters had merged with him completely, and what emerged was a suit of armor mimicking his form as the giant, black dragon.

“How pitiful. Do you think growing a couple of sizes is enough to defeat me?”

“You’ll experience firsthand that my size isn’t all I have going for me!”

The moment his gigantification was complete, Tirnanog sprinted at Palug full force. He lowered his claws at the divine beast with one mighty swing, as if he intended to settle it with a single blow.

A thunderous rumble of air shook the entirety of the hidden room.

5

The starsteel-clad talon slammed down on Palug, its impact so great that Erika found herself closing her eyes. When she timidly opened them back up, she could hardly believe the scene before her.

Despite Tirnanog being quite a few times larger than her, Palug had stopped his strike with one hand.

“Dear me, it looks like you’re no kin to the King of Serpents. A manufactured sham of a dragon. No wonder you can stand against me.”

“A sham? What insolence! Choose your next foolish words carefully; they might be your last!” Tirnanog roared and swiped again.

Palug narrowly avoided, lightly placing a hand on his claws to redirect the attack. Everything she did was done with minimal effort.

While Tirnanog was beginning to grow impatient, his foe was overcome with calm composure. When his guard was down, Palug shifted to her counterattack. Her claw slipped past his crossed arms and sliced a gash through his shoulder.

Where she had marked it, his armor was a scorching red like it had been exposed to intense heat. The tracks Palug left were in the shape of her nails, so rather than cutting, it looked as though she had melted straight through. However, the spell carved into Tirnanog’s armor quickly activated, using his mana to close the wound. Any minor damage would immediately be repaired.

“You speak of insolence, but what about you, false dragon? You should know who’s stronger now, so why haven’t you turned your belly up and submitted like a good little beast?”

“If that’s your way, then get on the floor where you belong, filthy feline!”

Tirnanog took a large swipe with his long, armored tail, a swipe which Palug avoided with a light leap. That was precisely what he'd been aiming for. While the swing of his tail had thrown his stance off and his back was turned, he unleashed an attack with his claws. All the joints on his right arm bent backward—this was an attack only possible with a body made of free-flowing liquid, a blow living up to his monstrous reputation.

Even Palug couldn't evade a surprise attack while in the air. Tirnanog's talons stabbed at her stomach—or so it seemed, when at the last moment, she grabbed his arm and surmounted it with a pullover. She dug her nails deep into his starsteel armor, performing another spin around it at a breakneck speed. His arm was twisted out of shape; it let off the detestable creak of warping metal.

Tirnanog's feet left the ground. It was like their positions had been completely reversed, with Palug having found firm footing, lifting the black dragon's massive body into the air.

It was impossible to damage Tirnanog by manipulating his joints. His body could freely shift between liquid and solid states. However, the speed at which his starsteel armor transformed to match lagged just a little behind. It was this slight delay she had used to lock not his body, but his armor, and seal his movements.

With that very same motion, she slammed him into the ground.

"Now beg for forgiveness. I'll give you one chance, deformed snakespawn."

"I don't need it from the likes of you!"

Tirnanog liquefied his forearm, practically ripping it out of the armor, as he used his remaining three legs to kick the floor and leap back. In a few seconds, the gauntlet that remained in Palug's arms dissolved into grains of light before condensing back on its former host.

This was an extraordinary battle between monsters. Erika, who had been watching in awe, finally regained her senses when Tirnanog landed beside her.

"It irks me to say, but I can't beat that woman with my current strength."

"Is it time for a strategic retreat?"

“No. If we can’t win with brute force, we can simply win with something else. You brought a few trump cards, didn’t you?”

“Got it,” Erika replied, tossing him the Disintegrate wand she had kept in her holster.

The Disintegrate wand had the ability to dismantle any form of matter; it was one of the most dangerous offensive wands around.

Tirnanog unhinged his mouth guard, caught the wand in his teeth, and chewed it to bits. A black torrent of mana overflowed from his innermost depths. Once swallowed, the magic began to circulate through the amplification organs within him. Black, electric sparks fizzled around his mouth as he fired off a dark beam.

His shot was wide, fast, and sweeping. Even Palug couldn’t avoid it, and as she took a clean hit, she blurred, separated into seven transparent, prismatic mirages. It was a peculiar phenomenon, like she was being projected on a busted CRT.

But it lasted only an instant, and Palug was quickly back to normal.

No matter what manner of monster it went up against, Disintegrate destroyed any and all matter, reducing it to its elementary particles. At least, that was how it was supposed to be. Yet there Palug stood, perfectly unharmed.

“My, that’s quite a dangerous spell you have there. I’m glad you didn’t accidentally hit our beloved prince.”

“How did you—?!”

“I was properly taken apart, mind you. I just put myself back together in a flash.”

Palug rolled her shoulders, confirming her body’s condition as she grinned. She hummed a random, nonsensical tune as she leisurely strolled toward Tirnanog.

“It was a fine attack. I would have been annihilated if I didn’t know what I was doing. Unfortunately for you, your biggest mistake was assuming I was made of matter.”

"If you're not matter, then what are you?!"

"Why, as you can see..."

After taking a half step, Palug disappeared, leaving an afterimage burned into Erika's retinas. Only five streaks of red indicated the path she had taken.

"I am made of heat and light."

For a moment, the powerful light she gave off forced Erika to avert her eyes. By the time she turned back around, all that remained was the armor, melted and torn into six pieces, and a liquid Tirnanog who could just barely maintain his original shape.

She had torn through the sturdy starsteel, leaving each severed cross section an oozing mess from having been melted straight through. Tirnanog's main body seemed to be somewhat alive, its black liquid wriggling in an attempt to distance itself from the scorching metal portions. The parts of him that had taken the heat directly gave off a black smoke along with the scent of burnt flesh.

"Graaaaah! To have suffered such damage...!"

"Are you alright? Please, don't die!"

"Worry not... I will not die. But I cannot fight any longer... For now, I must... rest."

Completely losing his dragonic shape, Tirnanog liquefied and slipped into Erika's leather bag. A large portion of him had been burned to cinders, and only a very small segment could still move.

"Erika... run..."

He went quiet after that.

Erika lifted up her bag and turned toward the exit. However, the next instant, a convoluted magic circle the likes of which she had never seen before flickered into existence around her.

"You won't get away. The hindrance is gone, and we're finally alone."

Palug's eyes laughed. They were the color of glowing, molten gold in a

furnace.

What now? Erika was rather perplexed. If even Tirnanog had lost, how was *she* supposed to get away? Scanning the magic circle, she noticed a string of characters she just barely recognized. These were the letters of the old empire, and while she could not read them, she could make out a familiar shape here and there. *Isn't that part of the inscription that was scraped from the obelisk?*

A number of threads joined in her head. The Beast of Contracts held the right to reign over snakes, and the Founding King's guardian angel granted him the power to control dragons.

She thought back to the lion-headed angel on the mural of the One True God. An angel with a medicinal vial in one hand. The Beast of Contracts had saved people by eating an epidemic. Even now, sick-eating lynxes were used as charms.

The divine beast that stood before her boasted claws of intense heat. The angel had brandished a sword of flames.

Could it be that the exact opposite had happened from the alchemists' legend of the Seafarer's Ruins? Presumably, there had once been a single monster called Palug. But as her story had been passed down, and she had earned herself many names, she was ultimately remembered as many separate beasts.

"Palug, you're the angel who gave the Founding King the ability to ride dragons. Am I right?"

Palug crossed her two fur-covered forearms over her chest, an ecstatic smile on her face as she looked up to the heavens. Her shoulders trembled, a motion which gradually grew into a broken laugh.

"Mmheehee... Hahaha... Ahahahahaha! How wonderful, little miss Erika. I was found out twice in a span of only a few years. What's more, one of them isn't even royalty—she's just a foreign girl! I've lived several thousand years, and this is a first for me." All of a sudden, Palug stopped laughing. She offered an elegant bow. *"That's right, Alchemist Erika Aurelia. I am the first attendant to the supreme Lord of the heavens, the One True God. She who was born from the left eye of the mighty sun, who shines far and wide across the world with his thousand arms. The name God granted me was Pestilence. The name King*

Guillaume bestowed upon me was Cath Palug.

“I am his messenger. I am she who swings the sword of flames.

“I am she who rids ailments, and she who rules snakes.

“I am the guardian of children, and one who hears the wishes of men—or I was. But that was a long time ago.”

Erika’s vision blurred, as though a heat haze had risen around her. The light raining down from on high was hit by a faint, red hue, after which it gradually darkened.

Blood flowed from Palug’s left eye, passing down her face like a teardrop. Mimicking this, a mysterious red liquid flowered out from the eye-shaped grooves in the walls.

By the time she realized it, the room’s temperature had risen so high that she was sweating all over. Yet the unbearable chill seizing Erika’s spine never left her.

“By now, I bear not a semblance of the power I once had. It’s all gone; only the dregs remain. It’s been used up to slaughter giants, to slaughter vampyres, to grant the wishes of the kind and the wise. It’s all been used up to devour the King of Serpents, to devour all manner of ailments, to save the people of my beloved king. I used my power for God. I used my power for mankind.”

Erika’s instincts screamed that she had to get away from this ruined angel this very instant, but her feet would not move a single step.

“And yet, I was forgotten. No one remembers me anymore. No one prays to me anymore. The source of angels’ power is human faith. Without it, I could not even replenish my waning strength. At this rate, I would face a slow and peaceful demise; I was sure of that. After granting just one more wish, or if another ten years passed, I would no longer be able to maintain my existence and I would simply fade away. I intended to accept that demise.”

Palug stopped abruptly and looked at August. Her eyes were warm, but her expression was filled with sorrow.

“But one day, an odd boy found this forgotten angel. At last, someone needed

me: this child alone. Yes, August was the one who gave me a reason to keep existing. I was as good as dead, and he wanted me to live. Because of that, I have no hesitation, no reservations, in offering this body and soul to his ambition."

Palug's words closely resembled what August himself had said. Insatiable devotion. Wishing for someone's happiness even if it meant sacrificing oneself. Even if ruin was all that awaited the two of them.

"But in that case, you aren't going to be able to completely grant August's wish. Could it be that you don't have enough power left to do it?"

"Yes, that's right. Even if, in addition to the powers I would gain from fusing with August, I burned through my entire existence, I would only be able to maintain it for six years... no, four and a half years at most."

The time period was even less than it had been in *Liber Monstrorum*. Perhaps that battle with Tirnanog had further reduced what little power the beast had remaining.

"Palug, why don't you just give it a rest already? If you keep at it, you'll both end up miserable. How about giving up on the contract and spending what little time you have left by August's side?"

"I know. That's what I've always wanted to do. But you see, Erika, I've already made my decision. I'll use all my power for this child. My precious prince has made his wish, and I intend to grant it."

"But, Palug..."

Erika understood just how precious August must have been to her. She racked her brain, searching for a better resolution to all this, but couldn't come up with anything.

"I mean, the sacrifice I need to obtain power already came here obliviously on her own two feet. I don't even need to resign myself to oblivion anymore."

Erika froze. "What do you mean by 'sacrifice'?"

"Now, what could I mean? Perhaps I'm referring to a clever, cute, and dreadfully kind little alchemist?"

Palug's lips, still half open, lifted up at the corners. This was the smile of a beast with its fangs bared. Erika was overcome with such dread, she felt her fingers grow numb. She could feel her fear draining her heat away. It was far too late, but now her dull sixth sense was setting off its loudest alarm.

Why didn't I notice? Erika trembled. What had she been doing? Why had she wasted her time unmasking Palug's identity and her feelings? Before being a courageous martyr hoping to empower the prince with her last breath, before being an angel who wished to protect a nation, this woman before her eyes was a beast starved for power.

"How pitiful. See how you shake? But don't worry. Your existence won't be erased. Your blood and soul will be converted into the power needed to fulfill the wish, but your physical form will remain. I'll use your body to live your life. Oh, how wonderful. If I have Erika Aurelia's body, why, I might even marry August someday."

With only a few words, this being had completely destroyed Erika's very conception of angels. The bombshells had dropped so suddenly that her brain struggled to process it all. The one thing she did understand was that she wanted absolutely nothing to do with whatever future Palug had envisioned for herself.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Palug approached. Erika drew her Paralyze wand from her holster and swung it at her. An unseen curse of petrification burst out, leaving only a faint glow on the wand's tip.

But Palug didn't stop. Her form blurred for only a moment.

She dodged it.

Presumably, Erika wouldn't be able to hit her with any straightforward attacks. Even if Erika's attack was invisible, or if it traveled at light speed, Palug would read the wand's direction and her eye line, dodging it before Erika could even activate the spell.

"Erika Aurelia. You came here to save August, didn't you? Then what's the matter? You'll just be saving me as well," Palug said with an enchanting smile, flashing her nails. Each time she grew closer, the surrounding temperature shot up.

Erika's eyes flitted to the exit. If she could just get to the doorway, she could put up physical barriers with Wall of Stone or Barbed Wire. Of course, when it came to Palug, she would quite likely easily destroy whatever walls Erika had put up. But what if it wasn't just one or two? What if the obstructions came in endless supply?

Each time she wielded her power of destruction, Palug had to shave away at her own lifespan. Considering the uses remaining in her wands, Erika put her chances at fifty-fifty, but if she could just place enough obstacles to make Palug give up on chasing her, she might be able to get away.

However...

Erika noticed two problems with this plan. Firstly, her bag was heavier now that Tirnanog was in it. Secondly, August was in the opposite direction of the door.

The mere thought of hauling this heavy bag made the ten meters to the exit seem like a boundless expanse, and if she used the shortest distance to get away, that would mean giving up on August. That being said, no matter how she looked at it, it would be impossible to shoulder August—who was beyond Palug—and carry the bag with Tirnanog. In the first place, she couldn't guarantee her own escape even if she abandoned both of them.

"The least I could do is end it painlessly. Good night, sweet Erika."

Palug slowly lowered her right hand. Dense, powerful flames were running up and down her claws.

This is the true form of the light that took out Tirnanog—the sword of flames from the mural!

The flames were nearly lapping at Erika when suddenly, something silver flew out from behind her. This projectile performed seemingly random maneuvers before it collided with Palug's arm, letting off a heavy, metallic *thud*.

Palug's right arm was thrown back, and the flow of the mana that formed her flames dispersed. She immediately lifted her left arm, enveloped it in flame, and swatted the flying object out of the air.

Bisected, the paper scraps burned up in an instant, leaving nothing but ash. As

Palug leapt back in August's direction, several thousand more papers flooded in, surrounding Erika.

Are these spell cards?

She remembered seeing this same formation before. A protective circle used by Hafan magicians had been erected around her. There was only one person she knew who not only specialized in this magic, but had managed to apply what was purely a defensive spell as a form of offense.

"If you want to kill her, you'll have to go through me first!" Claus roared as he stepped inside the hidden chamber.

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"Looks like I came just in time."

"Glad you could make it, Claus."

"And I'm glad you look unharmed... Wait." Claus frowned and glared at her, apparently only now noticing something was off. "Come to think of it, why are you in a place like this?"

"That story's too long and too complicated. I'd rather know how you knew I was here. Weren't you on a top-secret investigation with Eduard?"

Even if she had left the secret passage wide open, they were still in the innermost room of the Grand Cathedral.

"All I did was follow Anne's Alarm." Claus glanced at Erika's leather bag.

"Her what?" Erika tilted her head. Was this some sort of mistake?

Did she cast an Alarm spell on me? But Anne never got the chance to tamper with my bag. The only thing that came to mind was when the girl had shaken hands with Tirnanog. Erika realized that Anne might've embedded magic into his hand.

Presumably, she had anticipated that Erika and Tirnanog would find themselves in a situation they couldn't resolve on their own and had therefore called in reinforcements. Claus was a powerful asset; Erika couldn't have asked

for better backup.

“I thought Anne got wrapped up in something dangerous. No wonder the marker was moving so fast even though she was never any good at movement magic.”

“My humblest apologies.”

“When I told him Anne was in danger, Eduard took me off the investigation lickety-split. The other investigators all looked at me like I was one of his ilk! I’ll never live it down!”

Claus’ face turned bitter at the memory. He detested the idea of being treated as an obsessive brother on the same level as Eduard.

“Still, I really am happy you came for me.”

“Hmph. Save those thanks for Eduard.” Claus bluntly turned away to hide his embarrassment. When his gaze fell on the other human in the room, he pointed. “Incidentally, is that girl on the ground over there a friend of yours?”

“Who are you—”

The one on the floor was August. Claus had mistaken the long-haired, delicate-looking boy for a girl, and rather than resolving this misunderstanding, Erika decided to just carry on nonchalantly.

“Yes, a very precious friend.”

“Then we can’t leave her here.”

“Let’s do our best to help ’em out!”

“Erika, your sense of danger is as nonexistent as ever.”

“I believe Anne said something similar.”

“If you don’t have any crisis management skills, why do you keep sticking your nose into dangerous predicaments? I’d love to grill you on that, but I’ll save it for later. I doubt that monster’s going to wait for much longer.”

Claus held his staff aloft, deploying two additional sets of cards. Beyond the protective circle, Palug gave a bemused laugh.

“How cute. You’ve got yourself a little knight. Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a

dashing man to show up to protect me too. However..."

Palug took two swipes with her claws, tearing a cross into the barrier erected around them. In an instant, the spell cards that crossed their path were burned to a crisp.

"It's all rather toxic to a spinster's eyes, so won't you kindly disappear?"

Claus frantically threw in extra spell cards, enforcing his spell with a chant.

"What is this thing?"

"A phantasmic beast, an angel, a lion, and the royal family's guardian—a man-eating beast that will grant any wish."

"That didn't make it any clearer! Fine! That'll have to wait too. Instead, why don't you explain the wreckage over there that resembles a monster we all know and love," Claus said, his voice laced with restrained anger. Perceptive as he was, he had noticed the armor and liquid remnants that closely resembled the monster he had fought two months ago.

Erika knew that lying here would get her nowhere, so she gave up and answered honestly. "Well, you said I could do whatever I wanted with him."

"I thought you were going to give him a proper burial. Who the hell would agree to undoing the seal?!"

"I mean, I at least wanted to do something about the contract! Wouldn't you?!"

Even as he argued with Erika, Claus' protective circle grew thicker and thicker. It had achieved eight layers at the heftiest portion. It was even stronger against psychological attacks than it had been in the Seafarer's Ruins. In exchange, it now fell short when it came to physical defense, heat resistance, and speed.

"Come to think of it, Claus. Shouldn't you be using a few more of your spell cards for offense?"

"Can't. This protective circle is weak, so I need to keep reinforcing it."

"Is it different from the spell you used back then?"

"Yeah, this one's more than eight hundred years old. I don't know why, but

when it comes to mind-altering magic, the spells from the olden days are much stronger. If you haven't noticed, this is the center of the wave that's covering the entire capital."

Erika suddenly recalled that people with low magic resistance were unable to move under the influence of August's magic, and those with high resistance still couldn't get close to the cathedral.

"You get the picture. I won't be able to attack anytime soon. It's up to you while I'm solidifying my defenses. You have the wands for it, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm fine in that regard."

Erika picked a wand from her bag.

"Are you done talking yet? Can I intrude on this eyesore of a couple yet?" Palug said over a stifled yawn, having faithfully waited for them to prepare themselves. At a glance, she seemed lax and listless, but no matter how Erika scanned her, she couldn't see any weakness to exploit.

Claus took a few steps forward.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, monster. I'll take you on. Have at thee!"

"My, oh my. Then I'll go right ahead. Who am I to turn down an invitation from such a lovely boy?" Palug lackadaisically took half a step forward, lowering into a stance that put her strength into her legs.

The amplification effect embedded in Claus' staff gradually attuned itself to his ancient, defensive spell. In the next instant, his amplified mana dispersed all at once.

"What?!"

The staff split halfway up its shaft.



It had been crushed in the grip of a fur-covered hand. Palug had been over ten meters away, and there was a protective circle blocking her path, yet she had inserted herself between Erika and Claus in no time at all.

The lioness gave an innocent laugh.

“That’s a big no-no. You can’t point something so dangerous at a woman.”

“How in the—?!”

While shock crossed Claus’ face, he immediately cast aside his broken staff and pulled out an extra bundle of spell cards. Sparks of mana scattered between Palug’s hand and his own.

Palug’s red-hot claws were received by the protective spell he erected at a moment’s notice. Quite a few of these cards turned to ash in his hand while the others scattered across the floor. She enveloped her other hand in flames as well and continued her relentless assault. The air between them flickered a number of times, and with each time, several of Claus’ spell cards would be destroyed.

If they keep that up, the protective circle is going to be destroyed.

Erika had leapt out before that realization had even struck her. She circled around to Palug’s flank and swung an offensive wand. The magic circle that wrapped around the grooves of the Magic Missile wand discharged a bolt of pure magical energy. She scattered her shots, making them difficult to dodge. It seemed that five was the limit for rapid fire.

Palug lightly dodged without even looking in Erika’s direction.

“Well done!”

Erika hadn’t managed to hit Palug, but she’d loosened her pressure on Claus ever so slightly. He swung a spell-card-encased fist, which she blocked.

On contact, the cards let off a powerful burst of white light. Once the glow died down, Palug’s left hand was covered in a thick frost. Her flaming nails had been suppressed with ice magic.

Determining that ice was effective, Claus tried the same thing again. Palug avoided with a backstep this time, but Erika fired another volley of Magic

Missile. Matching Erika's attack, Claus shifted some of his protective circle's spell cards to the offense and chased after her.

Erika had aimed for the defenseless moment when she landed, but this proved ineffective as Palug never hit the ground. Claus' spell cards arrived a split second before the Magic Missile, and Palug used those as footholds to jump again. Of course, both Erika and Claus followed up with another shot, but these attacks were intercepted and erased by her right claw.

Palug touched down with an elegant twirl of her bright red dress. *"Dear me, I really don't want to use up any more of my power."* Flames erupted from her left hand, immediately evaporating the frost that covered it.

How much longer will we have to chip away?

Erika was feeling impatient. She was worried about Claus, who was caught up in such bewildering close combat. He was being forced to maintain a thick protective circle while also firing off ceaseless magical attacks. How long would his mana hold out?

"Claus, are you holding up okay?"

"Yeah, I've got plenty more where that came from. You've got an ace or two up your sleeve, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Fight like you're gonna settle things. I need you to use one of them. Please, just buy me a little time," Claus said, flashing a spell card imbued with magic Erika recognized immediately.

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The glimmering, silver mana surrounding this spell card belonged to the almighty magic that would produce a time-delay barrier. Erika understood his intent and nodded. If conventional attacks couldn't hit Palug, then all he had to do was stop her time.

Keeping her Magic Missile wand in her right hand, she drew her Hail of Stone wand with her left. Like Magic Missile, it was a relatively cheap wand, but it

contained offensive magic suitable for fighting against a medium-sized group.

When Erika swung Hail of Stone, Palug immediately jumped back a few meters. The spot where she had been standing was pelted by countless small but sharp shards of jade. This wide-area attack would be difficult for a human to avoid, but evidently, it wasn't too effective on a divine beast.

I expected as much.

Erika adjusted the Hail of Stone's area of effect, intermittently peppering down its sharp fragments. This spell generated a cloud of debris before sending it down, meaning the time lag between the activation and attack was too long.

That gap was where she used her Magic Missile wand. One of her high-speed, consecutive magic bullets finally managed to graze Palug's arm.

"Oh dear, you're really grasping at straws here."

"I don't really have time to care about appearances when I'm up against you."

It was a mix of magical and physical attacks—a combination of relatively slow-moving bullets from above and high-speed shots from head-on. She didn't have much control over where the jade fragments hit, but she made up for it with precise sniping.

Erika had launched a simultaneous attack with two very different magics. The shards from Hail of Stone had no gap large enough to slip through. Once cornered, Palug could no longer dodge; she was forced to defend. Swiping away the sharp gemstones with her furry forearms, she barely avoided the next Magic Missile shot. She was still smiling, but she didn't seem to have the same composure as before.

"Hey, I'm just a dying beast. You could hold back a bit."

"I hear that wounded beasts are the most terrifying ones."

"I see you have quite a high opinion of me. You're a wonderful judge of character."

This consecutive stream of attacks had driven Palug into a corner, but the same could be said of Erika herself. Palug dodged faster than she'd anticipated, and in her attempts to compensate for it, she was using her area-of-effect

attacks more and more. In no time at all, the uses in her Hail of Stone wand had gone down from around fifty to ten.

What now? I have a spare, but she's not going to give me time to pull it out.

If she stopped the downpour for even an instant, Palug would launch an attack. That being said, it would be unwise to drop the Magic Missile wand while it still had plenty of uses to draw another Hail of Stone. It was better than having her Hail of Stone run out, but that would allow Palug to close the distance between them. Even if she managed to shift the Magic Missile to her other hand immediately after, it required precise alignment, which would be impossible with her left hand.

The Hail of Stone wand ran out before she could decide on her next move. She raised the density of attacks from her Magic Missile wand as much as she could while her free hand rummaged and pulled out her second Hail of Stone.

She could see the divine beast weaving her way through her haphazard barrage of magic bolts. In her feeble attempt to dodge the charge, Erika tripped herself up and fell onto her back.

I can't avoid it!

A nail as sharp as a knife came to a halt mere centimeters away from her. It wasn't just the nail; the stone fragments had also stopped mid-descent. The only thing moving in her field of vision was a glimmering, silver spell card.

A rapidly deployed circle had cut them off from the regular flow of time. This delay magic created a space where everything seemed to move in slow motion. This one was so powerful that it was almost as if time had stopped entirely, and even the divine beast's movements were bound.

Only Claus would be able to move normally within the barrier. He held up a single spell card, imbuing it with a complicated spell. Once it began to fire off the same silver light as his circle of time magic, he slapped it onto Erika.

The sensation that she had been stitched to the air suddenly disappeared, and just before she could fall over, Claus held her up.

"Thanks, Claus."

“That was cutting it close. Looks like the neutralization spell is working properly.”

“Neutralization? Oh, I can move?”

She firmly planted her feet on the ground and stood up, leaving Claus’ arms. The surrounding time was still slow, and she could tell the barrier hadn’t been dispelled yet. Evidently, whatever he’d stuck to her prevented her from being sucked into the time delay.

“I’ve been doing a lot of trial and error ever since our battle in the ruins. But we don’t have time to chat. I’ve learned to use it in some new ways, but I didn’t manage to extend its duration by much.”

“So this is our chance to attack.”

Erika immediately swung her Hail of Stone and Magic Missile wands at Palug. A cloud of countless stone fragments took shape in the air while a bullet of mana materialized right in front of Palug’s face. However, the spells were caught up in the delay and didn’t move any farther than that.

“Looks like it didn’t neutralize it for your magic. I’ll have to work on that. It’s going to be a tough nut to crack.”

“What should we do now?”

“Don’t worry. I just have to be the one attacking.”

Claus gave acceleration to the spell cards he had deployed for his protective circle and smacked them toward Palug. But the cards ignited and burned up before they even came into contact with her.

“I have a terrible affinity with this monster. If paper doesn’t work, I’ll have to use something else. Erika, I’m borrowing your magic.”

Claus cast another layer of ice magic onto the Hail of Stone Erika had deployed. The cloud of sharp fragments was enveloped in a pale-blue circle. First, water vapor condensed on the shards’ surface, forming a layer of frost, then a coating of solid ice set in over that.

“Hail of Stone and Cold Snap should fuse into the combo magic Hailstorm.”

“I don’t really think I did enough to call it a combo.”

“Whatever the case, that changes the practitioner to me.”

On top of that, Claus added the acceleration magic he usually used on his spell cards. A wide area-of-effect attack in a time-delay barrier *with* additional acceleration would be impossible to avoid.

As he finished his chant, Claus swung down his arm. A myriad of accelerated ice shards drew silver trails in the air as they flew at Palug.

A violent torrent of light gave way to overwhelming destructive force. The hail that smashed into the floor crumbled, scattering into a razor-sharp mist. The particles of ice and stone once again left Claus’ control, fastened firmly to the stationary air. A glistening fog dappled with sparkling jade thinly covered the battlefield.

It wasn’t enough to completely cut off their field of vision. Even so, Palug was nowhere to be seen.

“She disappeared?” Claus gasped. “Where did she go?”

“Does that mean we completely annihilated her?”

“Hell no. She’s the sort of monster who can burn up spell cards imbued with freezing spells.”

“But how could she run in slowed-down time?”

The next instant, Claus lurched forward. The spell cards forming the time-delay barrier and his protective circle had been destroyed simultaneously. Erika rushed over to check on him; thankfully, she didn’t see any external injuries.

“I see, so she moves at the speed of light...” Claus muttered. As she followed his eyes, a red light crossed Erika’s field of vision.

Palug manifested in the air and lightly descended to the floor below.

“Correct. It really, really tires me out, so if possible, I didn’t want to use it. You slowed me down quite a bit, but I am light. Your falling pebbles are practically stationary in my eyes. But hey, if time had been stopped completely, even I would have been done in.”

The strength left Claus’ body. Erika wasn’t strong enough to hold him up, and he fell to his knees.

“Ngh, curse this blasted mind magic!”

“Claus, are you okay?!”

With his protective circle gone, Claus was directly exposed to the powerful waves of mind control. Large beads of sweat formed on his brow. Expending vast amounts of mana, he endured with his natural magic resistance.

“Oh dear, you’re struggling more than I expected. You’ll have it a lot easier if you give up and submit to my prince.”

“Like hell... I’m gonna listen to you! I’m not losing... I swore I would be Erika’s shield!”

In great pain, looking as if he would fall unconscious at any moment, Claus stood in front of Erika. Palug looked down at him with a thin smile on her lips.

“Who are you? Are you the same as me?”

At that moment, August’s shoulders twitched. Claus took his eyes off of Palug and looked around. His eyes finally fixed on blank space, and he spoke to someone unseen.

“Fine, I don’t care who or what you are. If you want to control me, go ahead.”

“Claus, what are you...?”

“I’ll be your little doll. In exchange, you have to—”

Palug quickly caught onto who he was talking to.

“No can do.” She delivered a punch to his jaw, so light it was like she was stroking it. Unable to raise a sound, Claus had his consciousness stripped away.
“I’m so sorry. I can’t let you put so much of a burden on August. But you were on fire back there. I’m seeing you in a whole new light, boy. So you have my forgiveness. Be thankful. You’ll leave this place alive.”

She smiled kindly at the fallen magician.

“Unfortunately, Erika Aurelia, you are another story. You aren’t getting away.”

The golden beast called out to Erika and narrowed her eyes. Erika blankly gazed back.

For an instant, Palug seemed much younger. Her smile was that of a cruel

little girl obliviously crushing a bug underfoot, not knowing what it meant.

“I have only a few moments left to exist. That is, unless I devour your blood, your flesh, and your soul. I have no other option. No matter what happens, I must fulfill my contract with August.”

Palug approached her one step at a time. Erika lurched back in kind; her instincts screamed out louder than ever before.

She briefly wondered why Palug hadn't burned her to death yet and came to the conclusion that the beast needed an unharmed offering.

How can I escape this predicament? What are my means of escape?

Erika considered her situation. August wasn't waking up. Tirnanog was regenerating, but he didn't seem like he could move yet. Claus had been defeated. Her father and brother were both working hard to perform their own duties, and they didn't know she was here to begin with.

No one's coming to save me.

Faced with Palug's overwhelming combat prowess, Erika was on the verge of losing her will to fight. She hadn't given up on life, but she couldn't see even the slightest prospects of victory. A mere human couldn't possibly defeat such an unreasonable monster.

“Otherwise, humans have no way to triumph over such a creature.”

August's words abruptly crossed her mind. Teetering on the brink of despair, Erika reached out toward this small thread of light.

“The beast was placed under a curse from God, so it couldn't decline any riddle challenges,” he had said.

If all the fragmentary legends were true, there was some worth in testing it out. Erika decided she would stake her life on this grain of hope.

“Palug, please listen to me!”

“Begging for your life? It is a pity, but it's far too late for that to work.”

The gears in Erika's head were locked up from fear and confusion, but she forcibly kicked them into action, blurting out a question worthy of a legendary

beast.

“What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?”

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For some time, neither one of them said a word. Eventually, Erika couldn't stand it any longer.

“...Well?”

The exceedingly awkward silence stretching out between them was made all the more apparent by the fact that the smile had vanished from Palug's face.

At least react, I'm begging you, Erika pleaded in her heart. Why had she said that? She was filled with regret. A battle of wits was her last ray of hope, but it was equally possible that her information was wrong.

“Pfft...”

Palug let out a strange voice. Her expression grew more and more strained, until she was finally unable to keep it in, and she burst into a laugh.

“Ahaha... Hahahaha. How do you know that one? Oh, you sly little devil, hahaha. That was supposed to be a secret between my king and I. It's been hundreds of years; how did you look into it? Haha, my, how embarrassing.”

The Beast of Contracts stared at Erika through the gaps in her fingers covering her face, her tail swishing this way and that.

Err, did I really do it?

Was it really alright to challenge her to a game of riddles? The beast was cornered and on the verge of death. Would she really accept? Letting out a sigh, Erika did her best to erase these doubts from her mind.

“I didn't expect a human to challenge me to riddles in this day and age! Are you sure you're ready for it, alchemist girl? This is where your fate is decided. You've opened a door to unspeakable hardships. Once the game begins, even God can't bring it to a close. This is your last chance to take it back.”

“I’m the one who brought it up! I’m not going to turn back now! You’re on, messenger of God!”

Why would she possibly rescind it? She was practically floundering around, flopping on the chopping block, and this was her last chance. Even if it would be a harsh battle, it was better than sitting and waiting to be eaten.

“Ah! The detestable curse! An unbreakable yoke of a human-loving God. I really don’t want to. Yes, I really, really, don’t! But I accept your challenge.”

Palug offered an exaggerated show of theatrical lament, embracing herself in overplayed agony. No matter how Erika looked at it, she was clearly enjoying herself.

“But a normal match will be my one-sided victory. That’s no fun at all, and it would go against my contract with God. Therefore, I shall grant a mere human the chance to defeat me. We will each take turns presenting a question, and if I get one wrong, it is my loss. You lose if you miss three.”

Palug stuck out three fingers and thrust them at Erika.

“Fine by me. That means I have two freebies, right?”

“Correct. In exchange, with every mistake you make, I will claim one-third ownership over your body.”

“Err, Palug, humans generally die when a third is lopped off.”

“Oh, you. Don’t be so morbid. I’ll just put a little mark on my claim.”

“What do you mean by a mark?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take it off if you win.”

Erika calmly nodded. She couldn’t imagine what sort of mark it would be, but it didn’t really matter if she would be returned to normal.

“The game is set. Now, here’s my response. What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night? The infant crawls on four limbs, he learns to walk on two as he grows, and once his age catches up to him, the old man walks with a cane—the answer is a human.”

“Correct.”

She easily got it right, but to be able to get such advantageous conditions out of an idea she'd thought up on the spot, Erika couldn't ask for more.

Palug hopped up and down. *"Hooray! I did it!"* she proclaimed. *"As expected of me! How wise I am! Now it's my turn to give a question, right?"* She took on a mysterious martial arts pose, seeming rather excited. Her appearance aside, she responded as simplymindedly as a young child.

"He dies every night and revives every morning. He walks a thousand miles a day and keeps his pace no matter how tiring it is. Who is he?"

Erika had never heard that one before.

Dies every night and revives? He's not a zombie, right? Then perhaps a magic or phantasmic beast from one of the other continents? Palug said it was a breach of her contract with God if she didn't give humans a fighting chance. In other words, this riddle was made so humans could solve it—it is a question even someone who knows nothing could answer.

It disappeared at night and revived as the sun rose. A shadow fit the bill, but a shadow did not often walk a thousand miles. Then was there anything else that came and went with the rise and fall of the sun?

Ah, I see. She quickly reached her answer.

"It sinks at night, and shows its face in the morning—the answer is the sun."

"Mmheehee, correct. Was it too easy?"

"Not at all. You could make them a little easier."

"My, that sounds promising. Next, I'll give you a problem so hard you won't be able to stay humble," Palug replied, beaming. *"But before that, Erika Aurelia, it's your turn to ask."* She beckoned her with a hand, barely able to contain her excitement.

What riddle would do the trick? Erika hesitated for a moment. Palug quite clearly enjoyed the game, and long-lived as she was, she likely knew all the world's fundamental riddles. *In that case, I should use knowledge from my past life,* Erika determined. Her questions would most likely be invalid if they did not make sense in the context of this world, but perhaps that world's simple riddles

would turn out to be riddles no one here could solve.

To test the waters, she picked out a simple one even a child in her previous world could have answered.

“A vast sea above, an inferno below. What am I?” she timidly asked.

A smile spread across Palug’s face. *“Hmm, a vast sea would be a bit of an exaggeration for a boiling stove pot. An undersea volcano? No, you humans don’t know about those yet. Oh yes, I remember—the answer is a wood-fired bath.”*

“Erm, that’s correct.”

“Hehe, you know about some peculiar things, alchemist girl. Unfortunately for you, my knowledge exceeds yours.”

Palug had reached the correct answer in no time. As well-informed as she was, perhaps that one had been too easy. With cheerful, grandiose gestures, she pointed at Erika.

“It’s my turn again! At times, it is a serious ailment that drives one to their death. Neither the most powerful magic nor the most skilled healer in the world can cure it. However, it is a disease that brings happiness to man and beast alike. Hmm, maybe that one’s too easy for a girl.”

She’d called it easy, but Erika had no idea what the answer was. If it was an ailment that could lead to death, despair was all that came to mind. Despair didn’t really make men or beasts happy, so she knew it was wrong, but what else could it be?

Plus, it’s supposed to be easy for girls. That’s even more confusing.

However, after rethinking it, she found herself right back at despair. Her past-life knowledge was undeniably getting in the way of solving this riddle.

Even so, Erika decided it was better to give an incorrect answer than none at all, so she opened her mouth.

“Is it despair?”

“Wow, you already got one wrong! What a shame! The answer is love. And I thought it was so easy.” Palug expressed her delight as dramatically as ever.

Then she paused, and her expression clouded over. *“No, hold on. Wait a second, despair? Huh? Why was that your answer?”*

“Well, if you’ll let me have my say, is something like love really going to make people happy? Seriously?” Erika replied, completely incredulous.

“Huh?!”

Seeing that Palug was staring at her, mouth agape like a nutcracker, Erika took a startled step back.

“Sure, in a play or book—made-up love is fun to think about, so that might make you happy. I’ll give you that. But does real love genuinely make you happy? Isn’t it painful when the other person doesn’t love you back?”

Erika recalled what had happened in her previous life. The faces of the men who had arbitrarily developed feelings for her, found themselves disappointed, and ultimately grown violent. If that was supposed to be love, she couldn’t think of anything further from happiness.

“I won’t deny it has a darker side. That’s why love can lead to death. Still, doesn’t being in love make you happy? See, how should I put this... this part of your chest grows tight, and you start daydreaming and your heart skips a beat whenever you think about that special someone. Since I was born, the number of times I’ve fallen in love is in the quadruple digits, and they’ve all made me pretty happy, you know.”

This time, Erika was shocked into silence.

“Maybe you’re a little too young to talk about love. You’re not even ten, are you? But what could this mean? Just what sort of life led you to that gloomy thought process?” Palug looked at her with pitying eyes. *“It looks like I’ve made a grave mistake. Right, how about this: I’ll give you a different question. I can’t do anything, but I can be anything. While I am of no use, I am more precious than all else. My very existence is a blessing, bringing salvation and happiness to many in my presence. However, not all wish for me. What am I?”*

Erika carefully scrutinized this second question. This time, a little thought was enough to reach the answer. The scriptures called him an omnipotent, supreme being, but it wasn’t as if he actually did anything for anyone. It was said that his

very existence was a blessing that brought people to happiness and salvation, but it was up to the individual whether they believed or not.

“The answer is God, isn’t it?”

Palug returned a mischievous smirk. *“How unfortunate. You were on the right track, but you’re wrong. God does help people out, if only just a little. The answer to the riddle is a baby.”*

Erika’s eyes widened.

“I’ve done it now. If the messenger of God is right here, doesn’t that mean God has to exist?”

If even one of the miracles passed down in the scriptures really happened, then that contradicted the conditions of “I can’t do anything” and “I am of no use.”

“Mmheehee. You still got it wrong. As we promised, I’m taking a third of your body.”

“Wait, no, please!”

“No can do. You’ve already kept me waiting for too long.”

Palug’s arm let off an amaranth glow. It was a softer light than that of her flaming claws, and she raised it, ready to strike. Slowly, the light grew, until it was so dazzling that Erika had to close her eyes.

“Yep, that turned out better than I thought.”

Erika opened her eyes upon hearing Palug’s satisfied voice. She was supposed to have done something, but Erika didn’t feel any pain.

Great, she didn’t eat me yet!

Relieved as she was, she pat all over her body to make sure it was still in one piece. Her fingers and legs were untouched, and everything seemed to move properly. She wasn’t bleeding anywhere. She still had her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her ears—

Fluff?

She finally noticed what was amiss. Something had been affixed to her head

above where her ears normally sat. Hurriedly taking a small hand mirror from her leather bag, she spotted the two little offenders.

They were a shade of gold similar to Palug's. However, while Palug's seemed to resemble those of a large carnivorous feline, Erika's were clearly from a house cat. They twitched back and forth atop her head.

Erika's ears had been replaced with cat ears.



Those things were too fluffy to be her ears. Too fluffy, too soft, and too pointy. They twitched around too much to boot. They were cat ears, plain and simple. An elaborately constructed pair of cat ears. No, rather than constructed, these were all natural.

They were warm to the touch, and she could tell blood was flowing through their veins. Upon realizing they pulsed with her own heartbeat, Erika was again reminded of the severity of her situation. What was she supposed to do if she wasn't returned to normal?

I might not die physically, but this is definitely social suicide. My heart won't be able to take it!

Erika often had the glassy eyes of a dead fish, but now they were the sunken eyes of a fish that had been left out to dry.

"They're adorable! Oh, they suit you so well. I promise I'll take them back if you win, but if you've taken a liking to them, I don't mind leaving them on."

Palug riled her up with a Cheshire-cat smile. While Erika very much wanted to politely decline, she had yet to recover from the shock and couldn't collect herself enough to return the right words. She had kept herself as levelheaded as possible, but even she was reaching her limit.

This is too much! You've gotta be kidding me!

Why did she have to receive such humiliation when she was already in the midst of a life-or-death challenge?

"C'mon now, this is no time to wonder at how cute you've become. If you don't plan on giving your next question anytime soon, it will be your loss."

As shame and fear threw Erika's mind into disarray, Palug mercilessly demanded to continue their match. She had to come up with another question, no matter how panicked she was.

This is no time to be confused! What do I go with now? What's brown and sticky is a stick. The beginning of the end and of everything is E.

It was no good. A majority of the riddles she remembered from her past life were linguistics-based, and the meaning would not get across in the language she was speaking now.

Ah, fine, here we go. This time, she would have to think up a question on her own. She ran her brain at full throttle and managed to piece something together.

“It is a cradle. It is a grave. It is both soft and hard. A sun that sleeps in a miniature sea.”

Palug giggled once Erika had finished her homemade riddle. *“Oh, are you sure you’re going with such an easy one? It is a gentle cradle that envelops and nurtures life. But it is a grave to those who cannot pierce its hard walls and therefore cease to be. A transparent sea of white surrounds a yolk—the yellow of the sun. It is an egg, am I right?”*

“That’s... correct.”

She’d easily arrived at the correct answer. The right to ask shifted to Palug again.

If Erika got it wrong just two more times, she really would be devoured. If she were to look at that optimistically, it meant she still had one free mistake, but considering how something just as bad as the cat ears would be imposed upon her, she didn’t want to get anything wrong ever again.

“Now then, alchemist girl. Another question from me. It is more ravenous than any beast. It cannot help but devour all who touch it. However, it disappears the very instant its plate is empty. It has been tamed by man, but at times, it bites back and devours its master. What is its name?”

Erika first thought of a dog, then a cat, then a number of magic beasts. The fact that it ate people meant it would have to be one of the bigger ones.

But is it really that simple?

The part about how it disappeared was especially incomprehensible. It didn’t die; it disappeared. Did that mean it did not leave behind a body of its own?

Then, just maybe...

“The answer is disease. Plant and animal alike, everything that lives is at risk of some sort of pathogen. It works mindlessly. What’s more, if it actually kills its victim, the ailment itself no longer exists.”

“Mmheehee, I see. You’ve thought this through.”

Erika patted her chest, a relieved sigh escaping her lips. However, Palug’s expression soon changed to a mischievous grin.

“But that’s wrong. Disease does not eat things that are not alive, and man has not tamed it. The answer is fire. Fire burns anything it touches. If it runs out of things to burn, it can no longer exist. Mankind has made fire their own and has learned the skills to tame it. However, should the fire go so far, the human who attempts to contain it will be burnt to cinders.”

Once she had finished explaining, Palug lifted her right hand in a fluid gesture.

“Now then, that means two-thirds of your body belongs to me. Are you ready for it, Erika Aurelia?”

Her claws glowed with the same light as before. Erika reflexively shrunk back, covering her face with both her hands. These efforts proved meaningless, as Palug’s claws made contact regardless.

O-Oh no! This is—!

Erika could feel something moving inside her clothes. A lengthy mass covered in velvety fur brushed up against her skin. It stuffed the inside of her clothes, making her dress suddenly feel too tight. Going off the shape and length she pictured as it pressed against her leg, it was evidently a tail.

She tried moving it, getting it well out of the way and well out of mind.

The fact she had grown such a thing—and the fact she could move it as well—filled Erika with terror. She could feel her bodily integrity slipping away.

“To think you were so incompetent at this. You’d better come up with something at least halfway challenging, or you’ll really be in for it.”

Palug backed these words with a delightful flash of her sharp fangs. This was the face of an apex predator.

It irks me, Erika thought as she glared at the smile of the victor. She couldn’t

lose anymore. Then what was she supposed to do? Presumably, she couldn't win through legitimate means. She had discovered a loophole by challenging the beast in a game of riddles, yet she still found herself cornered. Erika simply fell too far short both in strength and in wisdom.

Is there really nothing I can do? she asked herself. Was there no other way for a normal human to oppose a monster who exceeded human understanding?

How did the weak humans defeat monsters in old fairy tales?

In some stories, the humans gave them wine until they fell asleep. In others, the humans riled and tricked them until they transformed into a weaker life-form. In others still, the humans disguised themselves and earned their trust until they learned their true name or weakness.

Not a single one of these encounters had been upright; they had all included some rule-breaking or other underhanded method. Was there any way she could cheat Palug in this game of riddles? If the beast detected any obvious attempt at foul play, it could cost Erika her life. She needed the sort of dishonest question that would draw Palug's interest and distract her from the real matter at hand.

What was Palug strongly interested in that she might think long and hard about? Erika could think of only one thing.

"Prince August," Erika said abruptly.

She saw Palug's ears jerk at the mere mention of the name. Palug's composed smile remained, but the absence of any cheeky response was proof that she was deeply invested in the subject.

"Yes, Prince August. I am the one dearest to Prince August. What is my name?"

While she had proposed the question, Erika did not know the answer. It was an answer only August himself could know, and knowing August, he would likely just dodge the question if asked.

In this case, the very fact that no one knew made it most convenient. As long as the boy himself wasn't around to deny it, she could just say whatever sounded appropriate.

If Palug answers “his mother,” I’ll make it so “his father” is the correct answer, and if she says “his father,” I’ll flip it around. Hmm, if she answers “his parents,” the answer will be his little dragon sisters.

So long as Erika prepared multiple correct answers, she could just deem the one Palug *didn’t* choose as the right one. This was the cowardly, underhanded plot Erika had devised.

“Now, answer me. You’ve been by August’s side for so long. It should be easy for you.” She gave one last push to make sure her foe fell for the trap.

Palug hung her head at this question but only for a moment. When she raised her face once more, she was baring her sharp fangs in a ferocious grin.

Erika’s heart skipped a beat. Sure, Palug was smiling, but she seemed to be far, far angrier than when they had been fighting.

“My, how irritating... To think you would have the audacity to ask me such a thing.”

“Erm, I...”

“Yes, of course I know the answer. I know it very well. I’ve been by the child’s side all this time. How couldn’t I have noticed?”

While Palug’s smile remained, her eyes were filled with hatred. Erika couldn’t understand why it had come to this. However, if nothing else, she understood she had stepped on a landmine.

“I hate to admit it! How dare you brag like that in front of me! The answer, of course, is Erika Aurelia, the alchemist girl from the west. In such a short time, you filled the lonely void left by the prince’s isolation and stole his heart away.”

“What?”

For a moment, she couldn’t comprehend why Palug had called her name. The realization dawned on her gradually, and along with it, shock and terror bloomed in her chest.

No, how is that even possible?

They’d barely met two days ago; how could she possibly have become the person he treasured most? Even if Palug was being presumptuous, the very idea

was way too rude to August. But, in the million-to-one chance that August did have romantic feelings toward her, Erika's foul play wouldn't work anymore.

"Hmm? Don't tell me you didn't know. You asked me while completely oblivious? You asked me without knowing the answer to your own question? I see your scheme. You've violated the rules, alchemist girl!"

Palug's scream was like a lion's roar, shaking the very stone beneath them. The light in the room changed to a menacing dark red, gradually building up a singeing heat. As if they had grown with her rage, her flames enveloped not only her claws but the entire length of her arms.

"How dare you besmirch the sacred Ritual of Contracts with a fraudulent riddle! You are a disgrace; you don't even deserve to be eaten. Now that it's come to this, you leave me no choice. I must kill you and use what little time I have left to devour whatever powerful people I stumble across in the capital. I doubt I'll find anyone as suited to be an offering as you are, but I should be able to scrape together enough strength to maintain my fusion with August for a few years. It's all for his wish—for my final wish!"

Intense heat stroked Erika's skin. It filled the air, scorching the inside of her throat. She looked at Claus, then at Tirnanog and August.

There was a chance Claus would be devoured as an offering. Perhaps Palug would honor her arbitrary promise and overlook him. But then there was a chance that Anne or Duchess Hafan would become casualties.

Palug was strongly opposed to Tirnanog. She definitely wouldn't let the black dragon live. Perhaps—conscientious as he was—he would recklessly challenge her again to avenge a friend.

So long as August fused with Palug, the loss of his riding abilities was unavoidable. At the end of his route in the game, he gave the impression that he would leave the royal family so as not to get in the way of his younger brother's claim to the throne. In other words, he was bound to lose his family.

If that wasn't bad enough, once Palug had lost her sanity, it was up to August—who by then would have no memories of her—to deal the final blow. This was a tragedy composed of actors who would be none the wiser, and it was a fate Erika couldn't endure.

I knew this would happen. I should have just surrendered the match. She was overcome with regret. I should have just let myself be eaten. Then, at the very least, Palug's heart would be saved.

The red-hot nails grew closer and closer. As she was faced with a death she had no means to avoid, Erika steeled her resolve and closed her eyes.

"Ngh?!" Palug groaned.

Even through her eyelids, Erika could tell just how close the dazzling blaze of those flaming claws had come. However, the blow had never landed.

What could this mean? She was so angry; there's no way she's forgiven me.

When Erika opened her eyes, she was confronted with a flaming arm. However, Palug's arm had been stopped the very instant before she could strike.

Is this Claus' doing?

However, Claus was still on the floor. Erika looked around, but there didn't seem to be any spell cards deployed. In other words, this was not a time-delay barrier.

Then what happened?

Erika took another look and finally locked eyes with the culprit.

"Hold it right there, Palug. You've got no right to kill Erika."

"No... Impossible... H-How?"

August was standing up, and his palm was outstretched toward Palug. There was sweat on his brow, and his pallor made it clear he was on the verge of collapse, but he had managed to muster all of his strength and stop her in her tracks.

Palug's face was like that of a toddler cowering as her misdeeds were brought to light. The flames vanished from both her hands. At the same time, her bloodlust was firmly tucked away.

August endured the pain, closing in on her one step at a time. He had a gentle smile on his face, one that seemed to say he understood everything.

“I mean, you don’t know the answer either, Palug. You don’t know who’s dearest to me.”

10

Confirming Palug had lost the will to fight, August undid his magic. Her paralysis loosened, but when it did, August was the one who began to fall. Palug gently caught him before he could collapse.

“August! Why did you push yourself so far?! You conceded the power of your soul to me, so you shouldn’t be able to move until the completion of the contract!”

“Yeah, I was out like a light. But then I was shaken awake by a zealous and supremely annoying voice.” August glanced at Claus, who was still on the floor. “‘I’ll lend you this unmoving body. You have to protect Erika. I don’t care if I lose my life in the process.’ After he said all that, I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing, right?”

“August, did you...?”

“Thanks to that, I heard everything from that point on. Glad I could make it in time.” Unstable as he was, he stood up on his own. “I’m sorry, Erika. I put you in danger. I honestly never thought you’d chase me all the way here.”

“No need to apologize. I did it of my own accord.”

“Even so, I have to thank you for stopping me. You’ve given me a chance to avoid making the worst mistake of all.” August smiled softly. While his expression was weary, he had a somewhat clearer, more cheerful aura than before.

He hobbled over and planted himself a little distance away from both Erika and Palug. If lines were drawn between the three of them now, they would form an equilateral triangle. It was as though he was emphasizing his standing as a neutral party.

“Surely that last question won’t be a violation if I say the right answer. I believe something similar has happened before.”

Palug quietly nodded. She was terribly meek now, as if her belligerent air from a moment ago had all been a lie. She carried herself almost like an inmate awaiting her conviction.

“The question was about who’s dearest to me, was it? State your answer again.”

Palug awkwardly stated her answer once more. *“The person dearest to you... is a girl who came from faraway lands. A girl who saved you from isolation. In only a short span of time, she found her way into your heart. And in no time at all, she had become someone you could never live without.”*

“Yes, you’ve got that right.”

“She is the descendant of alchemists who sailed from a distant sea. Beautiful and fragile, with golden hair and eyes like the ocean. The name of your beloved is Erika Aurelia.”

August looked troubled and slowly shook his head. “Not quite right, Palug.”

“You cannot pull the wool over my eyes, August. Who do you desire from the depths of your heart?”

“That feeling probably isn’t love. For instance, a child who walks the dark road, never knowing the light, one day decides to look up at the sky. In the midst of the darkness, he sees a single grain of radiance. The child will reach for that lone star, knowing his hand will never reach it—and that’s where the story ends.”

August looked at the ceiling, reaching out to unseen stars beyond.

“While Erika’s certainly precious, there’s someone far more dear to me, isn’t there?” He lowered his eyes to Palug, who stared back at him, still unsatisfied with his response. “She came from distant lands and saved me from my loneliness. It didn’t take long for her to find a way into my heart and become irreplaceable to me. That much is correct.”

“Then who could it possibly be? I’ve been by your side for so long, and I never saw anyone like that!”

“Oh? Do I really have to spell it out?” The same smile on his face as the day

they'd first met, August pointed at Palug. "The one most dear to me is *you*."

Palug took a few steps back, shock written all over her face. Gradually, her eyes brimmed with tears, and her cheeks turned red. Anger and all other sorts of emotions were coming back to her full force.

"Wh-What are you talking about? You're just blabbering to trick me. I won't be fooled! Even if it is to save Erika, I won't allow such a transgression in this sacred ritual."

August shook his head, gazing back at her. "Palug, you were always by my side. When there were doubts about the legitimacy of my blood, and I could no longer hold a proper conversation with my mother, you comforted me in her stead. You stayed beside me when I was cut off from the world by baseless slander and irresponsible hearsay."

"It can't be..."

"The reason I could walk was because I wasn't alone. It was because I could feel the warmth of the hand gripping my own. Otherwise, I would have been cowering in the dark forever. Is that answer unsatisfactory?"

Palug fell to her knees. Her long, beastly nails were back to human proportions.

"If it was for you, I was fine with losing my life. No, I wanted to use the life I had left for you."

"I don't want to fly if that means you have to be a sacrifice. If I knew that was the price I would pay for a miracle, I wouldn't have made a wish. If I had unknowingly lost you forever, I'm sure I would've never forgiven myself."

Palug formed a lonesome smile. *"My gentle prince. I could never tell you I was living on borrowed time. I couldn't let you give up on your dream because of me."*

"No, you're the gentle one." August walked up to her, placing his hands over her furry arms. She lifted her face and stared into his eyes. August's smile had turned apologetic. "I owe you an apology. You were always so kind to me, I thought you were filling my head with convenient lies. That was surely why I couldn't even trust myself anymore. Yes, I convinced myself it was your fault

that I couldn't find confidence, and I kept running away. Otherwise, I would have been frozen, terrified. It would eat me alive. Maybe I really don't carry the blood of my father. Maybe I really don't have the talent to ride dragons."

"August, you..."

"But things are going to be different. You've believed in me for so long; this time, I'll try to believe in myself. Even if everything you've told me was a lie, I'll make it into the truth. I won't let you be a liar."

Palug embraced August, placing her head on his shoulder. His own shoulders were shaking, and the air was filled with faint sobs.

He patted her head as he went on. "I promise you. I'll defeat my weak self, and this time, I'll reach the sky with my own power."

A while passed before Palug lifted her face and stepped back from August. Her expression had cleared up, and in the end, it was unclear whether she had cried or not.

After letting out a deep sigh, she stared at the boy. *"Good grief, you selfish prince. You're the one who summoned me, and then you turn me down. You're the worst."*

"Sorry."

Contrary to her words, her voice was gentle. Erika, who was silently watching over them, let out a sigh of relief.

"Hey, August. I owe you an apology too."

"Out with it. I'll forgive anything you say."

"There's one more thing I never told you. If I gain a new master through a new contract, then I will disappear from the memories of everyone who ever encountered me."

"What?!"

"W-Wait, Palug!" Erika tried to intrude and restrain her, but the beast was a step faster.

"I, the angel Pestilence, acknowledge my defeat by the wise. Henceforth, my

master shall be Erika of House Aurelia. I stake the entirety of my existence toward granting her wish; this I swear to God."

The light emanating from the walls immediately changed from a sinister blood-red to the golden glow of the sun. Grains of this warm light slowly danced down from the ceiling like flower petals.

"Farewell, August. May the rest of your life be overflowing with light."

Palug kissed August's forehead. All of a sudden, a great weight was placed on his eyelids, and he could feel his body keeling over.

"Wait, Palug, I still... have to tell you..."

August reached out for her, but his hand swiped through thin air. She caught him before he could hit the ground and gently laid him to rest.



The falling grains of light soaked into August's and Claus' bodies. They approached the leather bag Tirnanog was contained in, only to be shot back by some mysterious force.

"Oh, it didn't work on the snake? I see, you Aurelians really have a knack for denying the grace of God."

"Wait a second, what's this light?"

"In accordance with my contract with God, all memories of me shall be erased from those who knew me."

"There's no need to do that. Please, don't erase August's memory."

Palug lapsed into a resigned smile and shook her head. *"This is something God decided; there is nothing I can do about it. Just as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Just as water flows from high to low. Apparently excluding those of Aurelia who are free of God's ways, no one may escape the law of oblivion. All I can do is add a little bit of myself to the phenomenon so that a slight glimpse may remain and continue my legacy."*

"...You've been forgotten like that for a long time now, haven't you?"

The legend of the angel Pestilence was fragmented, divided into the tales of many different beasts. The reason was none other than the law of oblivion. She was powered by faith, yet destined to be forgotten. Among her many contracts, there were surely many that hadn't even made it to legend; they were simply lost to time.

Palug's expression softened. Compared to how she had appeared when she was agonizing over her loneliness, she seemed to be someone else entirely. It was a little late, but Erika felt for the first time that this woman really was an angel.

"You don't need to look so sad. Even if everyone forgets, I still remember everything. My beloved memories are my lifelong companions. There was never a dull moment. Also... your Seafaring Tribe denies the ways of God. When I fade away, and the final oblivion gets to work, perhaps you alone might remember me."

“By any chance, did you lose to me on purpose?”

It was one of the few ways Palug would neither betray August’s feelings nor break the constraints imposed by God, as well as a way to make sure August was kept free of such a heavy burden. Defeat, or a new contract.

Palug could have killed Erika at any time, yet she would always bring up some new reason to put it off. Perhaps she wanted someone to stop her.

“Who knows?” She turned her back, playful as a jester, as if to refuse any further inquiries. *“So, Erika Aurelia, what will you wish for? Unfortunately, while an angel I may be in name, I’m pretty much just an empty husk now. I can’t give you eternal life or a mountain of gold. I’m sure this will be the last wish I ever grant, so if you could, please make it one worth dying for.”*

Erika thought for a moment over whether or not she had any wishes she wanted granted, then said the first words that came to mind. “What would you wish for?”

“Huh?”

Palug must not have expected that; she looked quite taken aback. Erika simply didn’t want to squeeze a miracle out of a dying angel.

Let’s pitch one in for a friend and a friend of a friend.

She knew what she had to say to this angel.

“You can have my miracle; I don’t need it. Now, wish for whatever you want. It can be for yourself or for August. That’s precisely what I want most right now. So that’s my wish.”

“Are you an idiot? We’re talking about a real miracle here. Even if I don’t have much left, the miracles I can give you are more than most people can even dream of obtaining. There must be at least something you want.”

“No, not really,” Erika haphazardly replied.

Sorry to say, I’ve already received plenty of miracles.

At the end of a miserable existence, she had been granted more than she deserved. She had been given a life surrounded by kind family members and an assortment of friends—though not all of them human. It would be ungrateful

for her to ask for any more.

“What good would it be for me? Use your miracle however you want for your own sake.”

She tried smirking like the villainess she was. *I’m seducing an angel here, so I should at least try to play the part.*

Chapter 4: The Sky Throne

1

That's the sound of a bell.

August Ignitia heard it ringing through his hazy consciousness. Perhaps someone was getting married, or perhaps they were being laid to rest.

Let's hope it's a cause for celebration, he thought. He'd had his fill of sorrows already. Someone's voice mixed in with its chimes. *Oh, it's her voice. It's about time to wake up.*

Like a bubble rising from the deepest depths of the ocean, August slowly returned to consciousness. He found himself in a coffin, buried in countless white flowers. Upon waking up, the first thing that hit him was the acute sense that he was drowning.

He reached out his hand, not quite knowing what was going on, only to find it gripping the hand of a young girl.

"Your Highness!" The call resounded through his heart with surprising force, and at last, he awoke. He sat up, scattering the flower petals that covered his body.

"Erika, is that you? Where are we? What was I...?"

"We are in a hidden room of the Grand Cathedral."

"A hidden—oh, under the mural? I'm surprised you managed to find it. Only members of the royal family know the right legend to track it down, and even fewer manage to notice it."

"What a relief. I thought you were a goner."

August realized just where he had been sleeping. He looked down at the coffin. "Wow, that's not even funny."

"My thoughts exactly. See? He agrees, it's in terrible tas— Ow, ow, ow. No, I

said nothing.”

There was a small cat on Erika’s shoulder, which was playfully kneading its paws against her face.

“What’s her deal? The little one?”

“This and that happened in all the chaos, and I wound up taking her with me.”

“Hmm, well color me green. How about you pick up a stray prince while you’re at it? Wait, hold on a second. What chaos?”

August tried to recall what had led him to the basement of the Grand Cathedral. For some reason, he was missing memories here and there, but he could still clearly remember that he had been the cause of the mess.

“I see... My powers went out of control.” Try as he may, he couldn’t remember anything that happened after he climbed down the stairs. He held his head as it was assailed with a dull ache.

Something happened. I just know it. After I entered the room, and before Erika found me.

Otherwise, he simply couldn’t explain it. From what he remembered, before he woke up, his powers were so feeble he could barely even synergize with a small self-defense dragon. Yet he could feel such overwhelming telepathic powers swirling within him that it was downright terrifying.

“Did the Beast of Contracts do something to me? Did I make a wish?”

“You’ve just woken up, August. Don’t—”

“I’m alright, Erika. There are a few things I have to confirm.”

August took Erika’s hand for support as he stepped down onto the stone floor, and he then immediately felt up the closest wall. He pushed it a few times, then leaned his body weight onto it and began whacking it.

“It won’t open. Gah! It’s hopeless; the room’s vanished. The wall doesn’t even feel hollow.”

“What are you looking for?”

“This should lead to the chamber that houses the Beast of Con—I mean, the

angel's crypt. But there's nothing here."

Memories of the Beast of Contracts fell away like sand between his fingers. By now, he could no longer remember the name or face of that individual. He knew that the moment he stopped thinking about her, he would forget she ever existed.

Looks like she rejected me, August inferred. Had his selfish wish finally made her give up on him? No doubt, the angel had left and gone somewhere far away.

August was overcome with a deep sense of emptiness, like he had lost a dear family member. His knees gave in beneath him, and he crumbled down in front of the wall where the door was supposed to be.

"Mew."

The cat jumped down from Erika's shoulder and licked August's hand. Something about the cat's body heat was rather nostalgic, and he got the feeling it was trying to console him. He petted it on the head and smiled.

"Thank you. You're a kind little kitty. I'm alright."

"Mew, mew."

The cat made a drowsy face, practically melting in his arms. With a deep sigh, Erika hoisted it up and dragged it away.

"Meow! Mew! Mrow!"

"Yeah, yeah. We've got stuff to do. You can have him dote on you later."

"Mrow..."

"Now, August, how about we get out of here? We need to do *something* about that mess outside."

"It's still going on? Wait, are the dragons still on a rampage?"

August tried concentrating on what was beyond the walls. If he simply thought to expand the scope of his telepathy, it would grow and grow with no limit in sight. In an instant, he had perceived the souls of over a hundred dragons, but he cut off his ability before he got too deep into their minds.

He could feel his heart hammering out an alarm. He had been in contact for only a brief instant, yet the frenzied panic of countless dragons had rushed straight back to him. What a frightening power. If he didn't use it carefully, it would burn the souls of whoever he used it on along with his own.

For the time being, he gave himself a sharp reprimand.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, no need to worry. I was just checking a few things. There are some unconscious dragons, but a large number of them are still in a frenzy."

"How can we contain them?"

"Let's see. If we mobilize the dragoons, we can have each of them form links and directly calm the dragons down one at a time..."

August suddenly fell silent. If he used this overwhelming telepathy, wouldn't he be able to stop a few of the dragons—perhaps dozens of them—all at once? If he could do that, it would greatly lessen the load on the other dragoons.

"But am I capable of that?"

"Meow!"

His question was meant to be rhetorical, but it got him an energetic chirp from the cat. The meow was like a push on the back, and it inspired a broad grin.

"Guess you're right; mulling over it won't get me anywhere. I was hopeless from the start, so who cares if it doesn't work? I'll try to get as much of the outside chaos under control as possible."

"Right. You should be able to do it."

"Hahahaha. Not that I have any proof."

August planted his legs firmly on the ground and held out a hand to Erika.

"Won't you be my goddess of fortune for a bit? With you by my side, I get the feeling there's nothing I can't do."

"Your religion only accepts one God. Are you sure you should be taking in goddesses?"

“Don’t worry about it. Our God is especially kind to women.”

Erika took his hand, and the two of them climbed up the dimly lit stairwell.

Once they were out in front of the mural of the One True God, they came across a boy in Hafan magician’s robes and the little, gold dragon, Goldberry. Erika’s leather bag was also nearby.

August had no recollection of the magician but felt that for some reason he knew him.

“Who’s he?”

“That gentleman is Claus of House Hafan.”

“I get the feeling he’s under an incredibly rude misunderstanding. I wonder why?”

“You’re imagining it,” Erika said flatly.

August looked at her, feeling suspicious. His eyes naturally shifted to the top of her head.

“This might also be my imagination, but I get the feeling there was something stuck on your head.”

“You’re imagining it. You’re definitely, unequivocally imagining it.”

“I can’t remember. It was so cute too...”

“The reality you are imagining does not exist. Give up.”

It was on the tip of his tongue, but the memory was gone. It was like it had been scraped away. He didn’t know why, but he felt it was a terrible shame.

Erika stooped down over Claus and checked his condition.

“Looks like he’s alright.”

“Was he caught up when my powers ran out of control? A Hafan magician should wake up after his mana recovers a bit.”

August cradled an unconscious Goldberry in his arms. The gold dragon he thought of as a little sister was at peace, her expression calm and her breathing steady. He patted his chest, relieved. Evidently, Goldberry was also just asleep.

He was about to get into her head and wake her up when he stopped himself. Was it alright to wield overwhelming power so casually? Would he end up crushing her soul in the process? Imagining it sent a chill down his spine.

“Is there something wrong with Goldberry?”

“She’s fine. I’ll try waking her up.”

August tried a more cautious approach than he had ever used when he was desperately trying to link with dragons. He gently stroked Goldberry’s restless heart. He imagined he was holding an egg—not hard enough to break it, but not lightly enough to drop it, carefully tuning his output. While the resting Goldberry’s heart had seemed so calm and smooth on the surface, it rippled with positive and negative emotions, giving way to minute tremors all over. They were like the small bumps on the outside of the eggshell.

He was so focused on their connection that he nearly overlooked the waves of anxiety running across the surface of his own heart. The moment he was about to use too much force, he frantically retracted himself.

August took a deep breath as he assessed his emotional state. In order to interact with a calm heart, he tried to still the waves created by his negative emotions. He soon realized this was a mistake.

If he tried to erase his negative emotions in one place, they would just produce a ripple somewhere else. By denying his own feelings to forcefully shape his heart, he had only produced even more distortions.

Even that’s hopeless.

August then changed course and instead tried to adjust only the concentration of the power he used. He delegated a little to watch over Goldberry, a little to monitor himself and limit his outflow. A little to take a commanding view over his interactions, a little to create a buffer zone. He allotted various roles within himself, maintaining a fine balance as he carefully made contact with his dear partner.

“Chirp? Chrrrrr?”

Tugged along by August, Goldberry slowly awakened. Her small eyelids quivered as she lifted her neck in his arms. While maintaining his own senses,

he let a part of himself completely take in everything the dragon was feeling. Two separate fields of vision, two separate senses of smell, two separate sensations of touch—he could even feel the difference in the heartbeats of man and dragon.

However, Goldberry's soul hadn't been dyed in his colors. On the contrary, it was like he had opened his own soul to her. This was the first time he had felt such a thing, yet August instinctively understood it was right.

Goldberry flapped her wings, lifting herself into the air. As she soared over Erika and August, the prince tried expanding his telepathy again to locate the other dragons. His reading was more precise than the last time, and now his perception went so far as to include their mental states.

He maintained the buffer so he didn't absorb the dragons' fury and anxiety, and he also took great care to keep from overwriting their emotions with his own. His interference was faint, as though he were brushing them with a feather.

Even as he performed this precise, wide-ranging work, he could still control Goldberry's body. August had her land on his shoulder as he narrowed the scope of his domain once again. He could feel his heart racing for different reasons than before. He could feel a sense of elation surging up from the depths of his soul.

"Erika, I think I might be able to do it now."

"Alright."

"I might be able to quell all the dragons in the capital, without having to wait for the other dragoons."

Erika smiled. The cat on her shoulders narrowed its eyes, as if it was smiling as well.

2

To make things easier, August started by waking the closest cargo-carrier land dragon and calling her close. He placed Claus Hafan on her back along with Erika's leather bag. Goldberry nimbly leapt onto its horns.

He and Erika walked ahead of the dragon as the party made their way out of the Grand Cathedral.

“The wide halls really help at times like these.”

“I hear they were pretty helpful when they were remodeling the place. All the larger art pieces—including the mural in the back—were carried in by dragons. Quite a few of them are too heavy for humans to lift.”

August chatted with Erika as he freely brushed with the hearts of the sleeping or rampaging dragons around them. At times, he would be struck by a dragon’s fear and sorrow, but these feelings did very little harm. He had achieved a balance between being a sympathetic, sensitive caretaker and being an observer overlooking them all—and through doing so, he could accept these strong, negative emotions without being swept away.

By the time they reached the entrance, he had almost all of the land dragons under control. Now that the dragons blockading the area had calmed down, August and Erika could see a group of people approaching from the main road that reached all the way to the Grand Cathedral. The crowd hoisted the flag of Ignitia.

“Great, it looks like they’re here to save us.”

“Looks like the king and my father are among them.”

Erika was using the wand that enhanced her vision to confirm the faces of the group. After hearing her report, August borrowed the eyes of the dragons closest to them to see for himself. Not only were the king and Duke Aurelia among them, but he could also see the queen and many prominent nobles from distinguished houses.

The sight of the king was a huge load off his mind. Among the active dragoons, King Henri was the most skilled when it came to controlling dragons. Even if the chaos had continued without August’s intervention, Henri’s arrival would’ve immediately suppressed it.

August knew he was in for a terrible scolding, and he expected his ill rumors to grow by a few; however, he was the one who had caused this mess, so he would simply have to accept it.

All of a sudden, one of the dragons soaring overhead changed its trajectory to fly straight at the group. It was a twenty-meter-class silver dragon. In its frenzied state, the dragon was instinctively hostile to the approach of an armed group. No one had noticed it, not even the king or Duke Aurelia.

Considering the average flight speed of a twenty-meter-class dragon, there were about five seconds to go before impact. Even if they noticed it now, they wouldn't be able to avoid it in time. Rendered fully mad by the prior tempestuous events, it would be extremely difficult to control.

Up to that point, August had avoided linking with large, winged dragons. His failure at the tournament had been truly traumatic.

But now's not the time to make excuses. Stop! Please, stop!

August released his telepathic power, extending the hands of his soul toward the rampaging silver dragon. He curtailed his impatience, reducing his power as he envisioned himself lifting up a small chick—and in that moment, he gently made contact with the dragon's heart.

Once August had soothed it, the silver dragon immediately beat its wings again, putting on the emergency brakes. The nobles finally spotted the dragon as it rapidly changed course and swerved into the sky. Having realized their brush with peril, a few of them cried out.

"That was dangerous."

"Yeah, I barely made it. The other dragons are getting worked up too. I should calm down the ones that are about to snap before my father gets here."

August returned the silver beast to the ring of dragons flying over the cathedral, then borrowed its eyes to observe the others. The moment he spotted another emotionally unstable dragon, he shifted his control and got to work calming it down.

By repeating this process over and over again, August had finally made contact with nearly every dragon in the vicinity of the Grand Cathedral. From small self-defense dragons to twenty-meter-class giants, from fliers to ground-dwellers, they all numbered in the triple digits—yet August hardly felt any strain. He knew for a fact that he had received incredible strength from the

Beast of Contracts, so who was he to doubt?

At the very least, he would have liked to offer a word of thanks. He couldn't help but feel disappointed that it would never come to be.

If she's still somewhere close, do you reckon she's watching over me?

When he lifted his right hand, the flying dragons rose all at once. They crossed, spun, and took formation as he commanded. It looked as if he was weaving an elaborate tapestry with dragons of all colors.

"Incredible..."

Erika, as well as the group led by the king, let out gasps of amazement as they watched the dragons dance. The beasts took on many forms as they painted the sky. A carpet spread out over the clouds became a wave as dragons somersaulted in turn, and right after they had intensely soared in a raging tornado, they scattered in a delicate way that brought falling autumn leaves to mind.

August shared their eyes, their ears, and the wind against their skin while giving precise directions. The link between their hearts was made as easily as holding hands, but it was sturdy as a chain.

Up until a few hours ago, try as he might, all dragons had refused him. All that now seemed like a lie, or like a dream, and now he got the feeling he would be able to commune freely with the heart of any dragon in the land.

It felt as if the world had finally accepted him. He had always been convinced he had no place anywhere. But from now on, all the skies belonged to him.

So this is what it means to be blessed by the dragons.

August felt it directly. The sky was so close, he could take it in his hands. Through the dragons' eyes, he was enveloped in a boundless sea of blue.

After he had seized every dragon around the Grand Cathedral, he branched out farther, calming the distant dragons as he went along. Finally, he was reaching beyond the island, and it definitely began to feel peculiar when they were so far away.

While August tilted his head at this bizarre sensation, he called these dragons

close as he did with the others.

“Oops, was that a little too much?”

“What’s wrong, August?”

“No, just a bit of a miscalculation. I found something rare flying nearby.”

He gave a wry smile, having realized exactly what sort of dragons he’d picked up. The moment it dawned upon the nobles and royals, they began to make a ruckus. Everyone looking up at the sky was swallowed by the shadows of two massive dragons, one white and one gold.

“They’re even bigger than a twenty-meter class? It can’t be! Are those Thrones?!”

“Don’t be daft! A king’s dragon can only be controlled by the king who rode her!”

“But those dragons perfectly match the description of the legendary mounts of the Founding King.”

“Oh, to think I would see such a miracle in my lifetime!”

Ignitia’s nobles shouted and cheered, unable to contain their wonder and disbelief. This was the first time August had seen the real deal, but he knew their traits well. Following Urthona and Tharmas, the Thrones of other kings flew down in succession.

Thrones usually flew at such high altitudes that they were outside the range of anyone’s telepathy, yet August had managed to reach them.

“Oh, those are the dragons from the statues on the bridge. If I’m remembering right, they were the dragons of Founding King Guillaume.”

“The white dragon is Urthona, and the gold one is Tharmas. I always wanted to meet them, but I never thought it would actually happen.”

“They don’t show up often?”

“Yes, it’s seen as an unparalleled good omen. We’re in luck. Excluding the Founding King’s time, they say Urthona and Tharmas only showed up when Savage King Jean saved this country.”

At the time, Ignitia had been outnumbered during its war against Gigantia, and Ynys Negesydd had been encircled by the enemy fleet. On the dawn of the day the nation would fall, Jean, who was but a common soldier at the time, had received a divine revelation and had successfully called down Urthona and Tharmas, which had led the other Thrones into battle.

Thanks to the overwhelming might of the dragons that had grown massive over the years, the Gigantian Fleet had been turned away, and Jean had immediately been heralded as the nation's savior and wed to the princess. This was one of the famous heroic epics almost every young boy in Ignitia knew by heart.

A greater commotion spread as even the Thrones of the Savage King himself appeared: the black dragon Urizen and the red dragon Luvah. These dragons had not been seen since the time of the Savage King's rule.

"Is this really happening?"

"It's the return of the king, of glory, and of triumph."

"Who could have done this?"

August walked out to the center of the plaza. First the Thrones, then the others all descended around him. They lined up in single file, forming a path as they lowered their heads to him.

Everyone looked at August. While he had become the center of attention, he still boldly walked past them.

"Oh! The child of destiny, more blessed than anyone!"

"My fealty goes to the king among kings."

"He's the king... He must be the true king."

The archbishop cried out in reverence, then removed his hat and kneeled down before August. The clergymen took their cues, while the nobles and knights also knelt down in prayer.

The soldiers, common folk, and even people from foreign lands took on the same posture as they were swept up in their enthusiasm. As everyone watched, unmoving, only the king approached.

“Father, I’ve caused such a terrible mess. I’m prepared to accept any punishment.”

“Not another word.” With that, the king pulled him into an embrace. He held him up as he would an infant, causing August to turn red to the ears. But the king was even redder in childish wonder and admiration, and there were tears streaming down his face. “August! My son! If your blood is thicker than all, if this happened because you were stronger than any, then who should slander you for it?! Take a look at what’s become of every man, every woman, every child, every dragon!”

August cautiously scanned the crowd. Not a soul was looking at him with eyes of contempt.

Once the king released him and set him back on the ground, it was the queen’s turn. Flustered as he was, August gradually formed a bashful smile. Rending cheers erupted as those gathered in the square extolled the blessed prince. From a safe distance, Erika and her cat watched him with satisfied looks on their faces.

3

Those who gathered watched this happy family with misty eyes. As Erika peeked from her hiding place, she put a hand to her chest in relief. August had perfectly acquired the ability to bond with dragons. His ability was recognized by everyone without a hitch.

Erika whispered to the kitten perched on her shoulder, “Looks like August doesn’t need our help anymore.”

“Yes, he’s just as blessed as I thought. We’ll both walk out of this alive,” Palug answered.

The battle had completely drained her of all her power, and now she had to survive solely on the drop of blood Erika had offered as part of their contract. Now, she could wield no more power than her appearance suggested; she had the strength of a kitten.

Palug lazily stretched out her forelimbs. While she was terribly worn out, she

looked quite satisfied as she watched over August.

“So in the end, what was he missing?”

“His talents weren’t lacking, they were excessive. The potency of his powers is what brought his misfortune. A sparrow may teach a sparrow fledgling to fly, but he cannot teach an eaglet.” Her voice was quite indifferent.

The problem he’d always had was that his telepathy was simply too strong. His powers were so great that they had induced fear into every dragon he came into contact with. The dragons’ fears had always been sent straight back to him, further amplified by his own insecurities. This vicious cycle had repeated again and again, preventing him from forming any connections.

His only hope had lain in his personal dragons, which would’ve been acclimated to his powers from birth, but only little Goldberry had ever hatched. The other two, which would have been larger and suitable for riding, remained in their shells.

It had only been a matter of time before August had grown impatient and tried to practice riding the generic dragons. However, no matter how many times Palug had warned him to limit himself, August had been unable to understand how much was too much.

He had continued to experience failure after failure until he had begun to doubt that he had any talent at all. Couldn’t it be that Palug had been too kind? That she had just been lying to him every time she’d said he had talent?

“I see, so that’s why he could ride an intoxicated dragon.”

“Yes. That mare let him ride her because the intoxication dulled her fear. Something like that never occurred to me.” The way Palug looked at August made it seem as if she was looking far into the distance. “Year after year after year, he would try to ride a generic dragon, and he would come home in tatters. I thought it would be the same this time. You can’t imagine how surprised I was when I saw him fly.”

“Huh? Then you’re not the one who arranged the cursed stirrup?”

“Of course not. If I’d known his dragon was equipped with something so dangerous, I would never have let him go to the match.”

Come to think of it, she has a point. There was no way Palug would allow such a thing when she held August so dear.

“Truth be told, I didn’t want to grant his wish.”

“Why not?”

“When you make a contract with an angel, we are unable to choose any means that have a possibility of failure. To absolutely ensure he could ride, my only option would have been to weaken him.”

“You would’ve had to use up your life to contain his power. Well, when he’s that strong, I guess there’s no way around it.”

“But you see, August’s abilities should be lauded. They’re a blessing. Those powers are proof that he is loved by God. I didn’t want to snatch something so wonderful from him.” The sight of August and the people surrounding him seemed radiant in the cat’s eyes. “Erika, you have my thanks. It’s because of you that I could take a gamble on his possibilities without fear of failure. Who would have thought I could see such wonderful sights while I was still alive.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Palug closed in on Erika’s face, nuzzling her soft fur up against the girl’s cheek. Erika had just done it to save her own hide, so didn’t feel she deserved the creature’s gratitude.

“Oh, but there is something bothering me.”

“What?”

“I get why he couldn’t ride dragons, but how did you change it so that he could?”

“Right, come to think of it, I never got time to explain. How should I put this? It’s a bit complicated. I mean, the change I made was very minor; I barely did anything at all.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Erika’s eyes widened in surprise. She had been convinced that Palug had used her miracle to achieve it, and that was why she had gone through with the ritual in the first place.

Palug smiled lazily. “In short, rather than weakening his abilities as they are now, it was simpler to weaken his abilities in the past.”

“You’ll need to be a bit clearer than that.”

“As long as August could learn to regulate his own powers, there would be no need to deprive him of them. All I did was tinker a bit with his memory lapse once we made our contract, implanting false memories that his telepathic powers had been dreadfully weak before he made a contract of his own.”

“You mean he’s not working miracles there?”

“Precisely. I mean, the real miracle was the powers he had all along. All that was left was to carefully regulate them.”

Erika felt caught between understanding and a lack thereof. She imagined it was like a parent teaching her child to ride a bike, promising that they would hold on tight but then quietly letting go once the child began to pedal away. Had something similar happened with August’s supernatural abilities?

“But what would you have done if that failed?”

“Well, I would’ve spent either the remainder of my existence or my contractor’s soul to make it work out one way or another.”

“Hmm, so you were going to use my soul to take a gamble, eh?” Erika glared hard at the cat.

“It worked out, so who cares? I thought we were done for when that silver dragon went berserk.”

The fact that Erika had been at risk of dying again without even realizing it caused her to shiver. Apparently, she would have died if August had failed at any point in time.

“Then how *did* you use your miracle?”

“I used it to free myself from all of God’s restraints. In other words, I’m no longer a beast that grants miracles. I’ve stepped down from my duty of hearing the wishes of mankind. Something as convenient as the Beast of Contracts no longer exists.”

August waved at Erika. Upon noticing him, Erika lightly waved back.

“Then does that mean you won’t be forgotten anymore?”

“Pretty much.”

“You won’t have your powers sucked away? You won’t be weakened or annihilated anymore?”

“Yes. But that doesn’t change the fact I don’t have long to live. Faith in me has dwindled, after all.”

“Are you alright with that?”

“Mmheehee. Well, if possible, I’d like to live to see his wedding, but who knows.”

“If it bothered you that much, you could have just married him yourself,” Erika teased, recalling what she’d said during the battle.

But Palug shook her head. Erika had suspected Palug felt a deeper attachment to August, but that apparently wasn’t the case.

“I thought about it, but no matter how much I love him and treasure him, he is like a son to me.” She had tried to serve August even if it meant she would lose her soul in the process. This was different from the longings of a lover; it was more of a parental drive. “If a mother keeps tying her son down and deciding his future, that’s just a burden, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps.”

“He doesn’t need me anymore. He can aim for the sky on his own.”

“You sure?”

“I have to be. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to leave him, right?”

Erika noticed a voice calling for her. August, the king, and the queen were beckoning her over. Beside them, Duke Aurelia was scowling at her, his eyes dark.

Oh, shoot. Is he angry? Remembering that she’d gone against his orders, Erika awkwardly smiled at him. The moment August looked back, rather perplexed, the duke immediately faked a smile of his own.

Whether she would be reprimanded or not, Erika would feel no less joyful.

After all, if she had died, she wouldn't have been scolded by her kind father ever again. After exchanging a look with Palug, Erika made off for the group. Everything was about to end without issue.

Just then, someone screamed.

"How idiotic! What a farce!" The figure who burst forth from the crowd had a face dyed red with bitterness and rage. It was Louie.

4

Louie still wore a few tattered garlands over his armor. They must have been jostled around considerably by the mind-controlled crowds.

"Don't let yourselves be fooled! You should all know it by now! Don't you remember how that swindler cheated in the joust?!" His voice cracked as it rose to a hysteric pitch. His hatred for the prince had made him deranged. "August, knowing you, you must be controlling those dragons through underhanded means. Am I right? Investigate him thoroughly, Your Majesty! He must be hiding something." Flecks of spittle flew from his lips as he spoke.

The celebratory air was destroyed as the crowd fell silent in the face of these scandalous words. They seemed to be at a loss. On one side was the miraculous prince who appeared to be loved by God. On the other, a skilled knight who had proven his capabilities on the battlefield. Taking their personalities into account, it shouldn't have been so hard to determine who was being truthful. However, there weren't many who knew their true natures.

"You're still stuck on that, Louie?"

"Your Majesty, I'll say it as many times as it takes for you to understand. August is a fraud!"

"Then I'll speak my mind as well. There is no known way to control a dragon aside from telepathy. With spells, charms, and certain herbs, it is possible to temporarily drive a dragon mad. However, such simplistic methods wouldn't allow you to ride it." The king frowned, gazing at Louie with lament. Distress was written on his face. "Please cease these false allegations. Do you have any definitive evidence that August has committed wrongdoing?"

“If that’s your angle, sire, then is there any proof he *hasn’t*?”

“That’s not an argument. If you want to accuse someone of something, you must be able to back it up.”

“Someone, something, you’re being so vague. I am accusing none other than August, and I am accusing him of being an impostor. Or could it be you’re showing unjust favor simply because he is your son?”

“Louie, you’re being completely incoherent. Calm down.”

Louie smacked aside the hand the king had reached out to soothe him, his blazing wrath on full display as he pointed at August and screamed. “Like hell I can calm down! There is no way in hell August isn’t cheating! If you look into it, you’ll surely find traces of curses, spells, or something else forbidden in this country!”

“Hmm, you mean like the ones found in your room?”

The voice came not from the king, nor from Louie, but from someone else entirely. The tall, young man emerged, parting the growing sea of people. He strode forward with a gallant step, his honey-gold hair and emerald eyes dazzling in the light of the southern sun. His normally kind and gentle features had curled into a smile of unfathomable malice.

Without a doubt, he was Erika’s brother, Eduard Aurelia.

“Oh? What’s my brother doing here?”

“Mee-yow, what a wonderful gentleman... Wait, what? He’s your brother?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“You’ll have to introduce me.”

Erika sent the kitten a doubtful glance. Would anyone do, so long as they were pretty? The golden feline didn’t seem disturbed in the slightest, getting worked up as she stared at Eduard.

“Oh, Eduard. So you’re here.”

“King Henri, I see you’re busy, and I apologize for interrupting. However, I think there’s something urgent you need to hear about the investigation.”

“Who in the blazes are you?! I’m having an important discussion with His Majesty!”

“Louie Ode-Ignitia, did His Majesty not just tell you to calm down? I recommend you keep your mouth shut.”

Louie was practically overlooked as Eduard took a gleeful yet elegant step closer to the king. His face reddened again as he was blatantly ignored. He then grabbed the hilt of his blade, marching right up to the intruder.

“You insolent fool! Do you know who I—”

“Paralyze.”

A wand had appeared in Eduard’s hand in a flash. The moment it was swung, Louie’s balance was pulled out from under him like a rug, and he fell. He was frozen to the spot, poised as though crawling on the ground.

“Hrmgh?! Mrmfff!”

“You shouldn’t snap at someone without knowing who they are. Even if you are the grandson of the former king, my tolerance only extends so far. Why would you pull your sword on the heir to a duke’s house? Are you trying to tear this country apart?”

Eduard prodded the tip of Louie’s scabbard with the toe of his boot. It gave off a faint metallic click as the half-drawn sword slid back in.

“I have plenty of things I need to ask you. Until then, could you behave yourself?”

Duke Aurelia, keeping a low profile by the king’s side, had a sour look on his face. He didn’t seem to approve of his son’s severity. “Eduard, you’re taking this too far.”

“Let him be, Ernst,” the king interjected, “Now Eduard, you must have a reason. Does this have to do with what you found in Louie’s room?”

“As expected of His Majesty. You’re spot on.”

Eduard nonchalantly turned back to the king with a graceful salute. Henri must have picked up on something; for only a brief moment, he gave Louie a look of pity.

“With the officials all gathered, I wouldn’t mind giving my report here and now.”

“Yes, good work, Eduard. You may continue.”

“Now that I have your permission...” Eduard theatrically shifted to face the nobles. “I was conducting a top-secret investigation on His Majesty’s orders. The investigation pertained to the existence of a mole colluding with Gigantia to the south.”

“Collusion?” murmured an Aurelian noble.

“To be more specific, I was investigating a suspicious flow of money between Ignitia and Gigantia, as well as the trade routes of cursed slaves from the southern continent,” Eduard smoothly answered.

The nobles of Ignitia immediately broke into whispers. As their nation had been built by former slaves, slavery was the greatest taboo of all. And among slaves, there was no one more unfortunate than cursed slaves, who were bound through inhuman arts. Gigantian shamans would drive cursed nails into the human body, forcibly subjugating the victim. The curse wrapped around the soul, snatching away the afflicted person’s mind, body, and dignity.

These cursed slaves could no longer defy any orders from their master. If commanded, they would even commit suicide without hesitation. Gigantia’s prosperity could be said to have been built upon the backs of obedient slaves treated as nothing but expendable resources.

“His Majesty noticed the existence of a traitor even before he gave us the order. There are cursed slaves lurking in the capital, pretending to be normal humans. Gigantian contraband is doing its rounds on the black market. His Majesty suspected one of Ignitia’s prominent noble houses was to blame—particularly the most detached one, Ode-Ignitia. Of course, a thorough investigation proved the innocence of your stepbrother, Lord Charles.”

Eduard lorded over Louie with calm composure. He had declared it all with a sinister smirk.

“I... I am innocent. These are false allegations.” The Paralyze magic had come undone, but Louie was still on his hands and knees as he glared at Eduard. “I

don't know anything about collusion with Gigantia. I am a part of Ignitia's extended royal family. I would never take the side of those filthy giants and slave drivers."

"If only that were true. Oh, how different things would be. However, our evidence points to you as the conspirator."

Eduard took a number of files, scrolls, and unsealed letters from his trusty case. Among them, Erika noted the names of a few famous Ignitian trading firms.

"Your Majesty, Father, please look for yourselves. Records of the illegal transactions conducted under Louie's watch, along with the instructions given to the captains of relevant ships. Oh, no need to worry. We already took the slaves under our protection."

"Hmm... What do you think, Ernst?"

"It does seem quite likely that these are related to slave trafficking. This one is an expense record detailing the costs of clothes, food, and transportation for a large number of people. Meanwhile, this one attempts to falsify earnings from some unknown dealings as sales from a legitimate company. Additionally, these orders to a ship detail far more supplies than would be needed for the size of the crew."

One of Ignitia's nobles said, "Your Grace, please let us see those too."

Duke Aurelia handed over the documents. A few of the registers weren't so subtle, blatantly spelling out that the cargo had been human beings bound for slavery. Anger surfaced in the eyes of every Ignitian noble who had a look.

"Wrong! They're false charges! The merchants are setting me up!"

"Apart from the registers, I have a letter which talks about a secret agreement between you and some Gigantian royalty," Eduard said flatly.

"It's a forgery!"

Louie desperately denied it, but he was clearly outnumbered.

"I'm sorry to say, but it's very real. The officer of arms I brought with me confirmed that the seal on the letter came from a genuine royal stamp. Maybe

His Majesty recognizes the handwriting? From when our united kingdoms and Gigantia signed an armistice, perhaps?” Eduard waved around the letter, his decisive proof.

Louie gawked at him, forgetting to even blink. Then, in his croaking voice, he sputtered, “Wh-Why is that here? N-Nonsense! It couldn’t be!”

“Yes, your mansion’s exquisite security *did* have me at a standstill. But just a short while ago, everyone conveniently fell asleep. Thanks to that, I was able to make off with every single little thing you’ve been hiding. I don’t know who did it, but they have my thanks.” Eduard’s callous smile widened even further.

Louie was at a loss for words. His shoulders trembled. Abruptly, however, he picked himself up and shot a hostile glare at August.

“Eduard, you should look into August too. There’s no way someone so inferior to me could control so many dragons. He must be hiding some grave misdeeds.”

“You really want to go there... despite the fact that *you* were controlling your dragon illegally?”

“What are you saying, you quack?!” Louie screamed so loudly, it was like his throat would burst. His attempt to drag August down with him had missed its mark. He tried to clasp a hand at Eduard’s leg before he could say any more, but he was immediately held down by stalwart soldiers.

“Now then, everyone. What I seized from him wasn’t restricted to just papers.”

“No! Stop! Please, anything but that!”

“If you would have a look at this little thing here...”

Ignoring Louie’s writhing and thrashing, Eduard offhandedly produced a small scrap of metal from his pocket. The mere sight of it caused everyone to hold their breath. It was a single dull, metallic nail.

When driven into a human, the nail would either subjugate them or transform their body into that of a giant. If embedded into another life-form, in exchange for complete control, it inflicted unimaginable pain. This small nail was none

other than the lowest, most heinous torture device produced by Gigantia.

“I know nothing! He’s lying! I know absolutely nothing about that blessed nail!” Louie cried.

No one believed him at this point. Everyone gathered gazed upon him with disdain and mistrust.

“I won’t deny that I’m a liar. Indeed, this cursed nail was not seized from your mansion—it was extracted from your dragon, Camellia. Incidentally, what did you just call it?”

“Gah! That was—no, you’re wrong! A little slip of the tongue!” His face, red from indignation, immediately turned pale.

Eduard continued to look at him, his grin full of unabashed contempt. “You’ve dug your own grave, Louie. No one in these lands would ever call it ‘blessed.’ To the people of these united kingdoms, it is a curse more terrible than any other. They would never even think to attach divine language to such a vile, wicked artifact.”

Louie looked up at Eduard, unable to reply. His eyes burned with rage.

“When we tried to pull it out, Camellia resisted us at every turn. Surely she knew that as long as this despicable thing rested in her flesh, she would continue to experience hellish torment. No doubt she was covering for you.”

An appreciative expression befitting a gentleman took the place of his dark smile as he looked into the distance. Was this change caused by the image of Camellia writhing in pain?

“Of all things, to hammer a filthy cursed nail into a dragon!”

“You fool! You used a nail to cheat?”

“Did you want to win that badly?! Heretic!”

“You’re a disgrace to the dragoons! Repent in death!”

The anger of Ignitia’s people had gone far beyond the boiling point. They hurled countless insults at Louie, filling the air. He had committed unforgivable blasphemy and had abused a dragon, crimes which could be considered treason.

King Henri walked up to the fallen boy, his expression full of sorrow and anguish. He looked down at Louie, but the boy refused to look him in the eye.

“I tried to be a second father to you. Only now do I see how badly I must have failed. I could never teach you the most important things.”

“Pff... Hahaha... Ahahahaha!” In response, Louie threw back his head and laughed hysterically. “Hahahaha! You? Take the place of my father? You would steal not only the throne, but also his *child* from him?! I’ve never once thought of you as a father!”

Louie’s screechings were a bitter pill for the king to swallow, but he persevered. He continued his remonstrations without raising his voice.

“No matter your take on the matter, you needed someone to support you. One day, August would need a confidant he could rely on. I thought, in time, the message would get across.”

“Yes, I understood it well enough. You want to put a collar on me? Think again! You’re not going to waste my life, my talents. Not you, nor that coward August.”

Thrusting aside the king’s outstretched hand for a second time, Louie sprang to his feet. Like before, his arms were immediately pinned by the soldiers.

“I don’t take orders from you. That’s right, why should I have to lower my head?! A thief of a king and his swindler prince. Each and every one of you looks at me with those hypocritical eyes! The royal family as it is now is full of shams! The true heir to the throne should have been me! A curse upon you! A curse upon everyone who unjustly snatched my country from me!”

The king shook his head, exasperated. After Duke Aurelia and Eduard exchanged a look, Eduard barked out an order to the soldiers.

“Throw Louie into the noblemen’s prison. Don’t let his dragons anywhere near him.”

“Sir, yes sir.”

Metal shackles were fastened to his wrists with a resounding clank. Two soldiers led Louie away, practically dragging him along. As the atmosphere

loosened up, many thought that would be the end of it.

“Don’t let my dragons near me? You fools.” With that ominous murmur, a purple shadow shot out from his tabard. As it flew by, the chain linking his hands was torn to shreds. The soldiers staggered and fell to their knees as the purple blur collided with their bodies. The armor around their abdomens was hollowed out, as if the metal had been crudely torn away with a sharp twist, and their clothes were soaked in blood.

The small, violet dragon perched on Louie’s shoulder and spat out two bloodstained scraps of iron.

“Go, Sylvatica! Kill these filthy usurpers! Kill Henri!”

Sylvatica kicked off Louie’s shoulder and took to the air.

5

The little dragon surged forward, making a beeline for the royal family. The king and queen had immediately called for their guard dragons to protect them. Lagging slightly behind, the soldiers, knights, and nobles moved to protect the king.

However, there were a few who had already acted with completely different intentions.

This is a bluff, Erika concluded. There were plenty of Hafan magicians gathered here, so an assassination attempt on the king would not succeed. That was ignoring the fact that he could control his dragon purely with his thoughts—it was strange for him to have gone out of his way to verbally give the order. However, Louie’s abilities had put him on equal footing with August, so he was surely not to be trifled with.

Louie wouldn’t dare make a mistake here.

Erika drew her Paralyze wand from her holster, preparing for an emergency. Just as she’d expected, Louie dashed straight at her. After all, she was isolated from the rest of them.

Louie’s hand was wrapped around a sword he’d snatched from a soldier.

Presumably, his true goal is to take someone hostage—most likely me.

Kicking off of Erika's shoulder, Palug jumped out in front of Louie's eyes. The divine beast was now no more than an ordinary kitten, and she was easily brushed aside. In the moment of blindness Palug had risked her life to create, Erika immediately swung her wand.

However, it only took half a step to the side for Louie to avoid the spell. As this happened, Sylvatica had deftly changed its target, snapping Eduard's wand and putting a check on Goldberry.

Erika swung the wand again. Time seemed so terribly slow.

It's no use! I won't make it in time!

Louie grabbed her wrist and twisted it, pressing his stolen sword against her throat. Erika reflexively stifled a cry of pain, but the wand had already fallen from her hand.

"See how the tables turn, Eduard! How does it feel to have something precious to you taken away?" As Louie gleefully raised his voice, Sylvatica perched on his shoulder once again. A cruel smirk filled his face.

Erika struggled to peel away his hand, but Louie didn't even flinch. She smacked her heel into his foot with all her might, but the sensation of hard metal armor made her realize it was pointless.

"Not another move, Eduard and Ernst. If you really value this girl, you'll keep your hands away from your wands. That goes for you too, Henri and August. Your dragons had better stand down. If I die, Sylvatica here will drive a nail through the girl's spine."

Eduard and Ernst dropped their wands on the spot while August held back the dragons. The king ordered the soldiers and nobles not to attack.

Erika locked eyes with Palug, who was hiding in the shadow of the wings of one of the dragons, and shook her head. Perhaps Palug would be able to seal both Louie and Sylvatica at the same time, but the price would be her life.

After Erika had only just saved the beast, she couldn't quite let that happen.

While Louie was screaming away, Erika took a deep breath. She confirmed her

present situation one detail at a time. She wasn't injured yet. While her right arm was locked, her left was still free. All the wands left in her holster were far too dangerous to use on a human, but she would be physically able to draw them.

Louie's right hand was occupied holding Erika in place, while his left was taken up by the sword. His eyes were focused on the king.

The problem is Sylvatica. The dragon kept glancing in her direction. She knew she would be attacked if she tried to draw a wand. If her arm were to be injured, it would be of no consequence to Louie. Even if she found her lucky chance to knock Louie out, Sylvatica wouldn't hold back.

It seemed Sylvatica couldn't be controlled even with August's powerful telepathy. Presumably, Ignitia's powers did not apply to a dragon stuck with a nail.

Eduard glanced at Duke Aurelia before answering Louie.

"Fine. Aurelia will arrange a ship to Karkinos for you. I'll be the navigator."

"You're not getting anywhere near me!"

"Even if I'm unarmed? Are you that scared of me?"

"I won't fall for that one. Get me a female navigator. If you can't, then fetch me some geezer, withered and weathered like an old weed."

"I understand. Give me some time."

"You have until sunset. If you're even a second late..."

A stiff smile on his face, Louie pushed the edge of the blade against Erika's neck. The blade was honed to a razor-sharp point but didn't cut into her, perhaps because of the angle.

If I move, he'll cut straight through my carotid. Erika could feel it through her skin. *If I move... Right, I just have to move.*

Erika aimed for the moment the pressure from the sword loosened up, then used her left hand to grab Louie's wrist. She shoved her cheek straight into the edge of the blade. A hot thread of pain streaked across her face, and a sticky liquid began to drip from the wound.

“Then this woman is as good as—*what* are you doing?!”

Her injury triggered the activation of her anti-kidnapping magic. A wide-range Paralyze spell had been invoked from the simple buttons on her dress. For just a moment, Louie and Sylvatica were both frozen in place. Using her whole body as a spring, Erika kicked off of Louie and rolled out of his arms.

August immediately ran over to her. Duke Aurelia and Eduard had already drawn their wands, thrusting them out toward Louie and Sylvatica.

“Disarm!”

“Ice Coffin!”

The sword snapped out of Louie’s hand. At the same time, Sylvatica’s wings were sealed in ice, and she dropped like a rock. Once she was on the ground, Goldberry held her down.

Erika tried to get as far away as she could, but her feet caught on her dress, throwing her off balance. She fell to the ground, arms outstretched.

Recovering from his momentary paralysis, Louie tried to reach for Erika. However, his arm stopped after just a few centimeters. There was a familiar magic circle wrapped around it. He was being held in place by glowing spell cards.

“What’s your problem, brat?! Don’t get in—”

“Silence.”

Claus was standing behind Louie. He glared, looking displeased as could be, as he mercilessly smacked a spell-card-wrapped fist into the boy’s face.

August, who had leapt out at the same time, got in a powerful punch from the opposite side.

As he took the two fists at once, Louie’s eyes rolled back into his head. He crumpled down, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, foaming at the mouth as he lost consciousness.

Erika finally breathed a sigh of relief. She practically collapsed as she sat on the pavement. Palug, still in her hiding spot, seemed equally exhausted.

“How *dare* you hurt Erika,” Claus snarled at Louie, his face looking like an ogre’s.

What perfect timing. Good going, Claus. Erika praised him in a daze. It seemed that bringing him to the entrance to the Grand Cathedral had been the right choice.

“Are you okay? Here, press this against it.”

“Thank you.”

August handed Erika a handkerchief, which she held against her cheek.

“Grrr, there are still bells going off in my head. What is this? I don’t understand the situation. Erika, explain. Why are you in danger *again*?”

“Hold up. Erika is injured, can it wait?” As Claus seemed especially worked up, August stood in his path with a belligerent smile on his face.

“Don’t get too buddy-buddy with me. Still, I must admit you throw a good punch despite that girly face of yours.”

“Hmm? Girly face, you say? Are you calling me beautiful?”

“Your words. Not mine.”

Even toward the crown prince, Claus was as harsh as ever.

“Erika, are you alright? Let me have a look.”

“Yes, Eduard. I’m sorry for causing you so much worry.”

“Not at all. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

Eduard pulled distilled water and alcohol from his leather case and began administering first aid. After checking to make sure she had no other injuries, he stood and walked over to Louie. Keeping the tip of his wand pointed toward him, he checked the boy’s pulse and confirmed he was unconscious.

He then turned to Claus. “As for you, even if you *were* going against an atrocious criminal, couldn’t you have been a bit more graceful about it?”

“I get it already, so could you put away that Death wand? Don’t swing that thing around,” Claus replied nervously.

“Cool your head, brother,” Erika implored.

“You’re both acting as though it’s a big deal. I’m not getting heated in the slightest. In fact, my heart feels as cold as ice.”

While he returned a gentle smile, the sinister aura around Eduard was like a miasma rising from a deep, dark abyss.

“Oi, someone stop this guy...”

“Claus, was it? Why don’t *you* stop him?” August swiftly sent the responsibility right back at Claus.

“Why is this what I get for helping her out? Fine, I’m never saving her again.”

“Mee-yow.”

Before Erika knew it, Palug was by her side, mewling happily at the prospect of being surrounded by Claus, August, and Eduard.

This time, it looks like we’re probably in the clear.

With that, Erika could finally relax.

6

Pure-white petals fluttered down over the city of white walls. As they fell, they looked like the feathers of an angel above.

Several dozen dragons and their riders made their rounds in turn, sprinkling these customary petals over the city. This spectacle was one of the main tourist attractions of Adventmas, and it was arranged to make it seem like an angel was passing overhead. Under this angel’s watchful eyes, the masses reaffirmed their gratitude as they had every year since.

After the confrontation with Louie, Erika had undergone treatment from a healer—an exceptionally skilled healer at that. In the span of an hour, her wound had closed without a trace. Once her treatment had finished, she’d been released into the festive townscape.

A few meters away, Duke Aurelia personally watched over her.

I should be thankful he’s actually letting me go out after what happened. Erika

silently offered her thanks to her overbearing father. *Sure, I'd like a little more freedom, but I'll lie low so I don't worry him anymore.*

"To think you would sacrifice your own security to seal the movements of that scoundrel. I am proud to have such a courageous comrade."

"What are you talking about? Erika's on her way to becoming a woman, you know. Her face is important. We're lucky it didn't leave a mark."

Tirnanog and Palug were arguing at her feet. Tirnanog's current armor was a set she had constructed while she was being treated. She hadn't had the time nor the resources, so it was just barely pieced together without any extra functions.

"Silence, cat! What's wrong with praising the efforts of a friend?!"

"Ahahaha! Who are you trying to hit with such a weak punch? Don't think a sluggish serpent can defeat the King of Beasts!"

The two legendary beasts had begun a game of tag, running circles around Erika's feet. Tirnanog swung his claws, but Palug narrowly avoided them.

"Settle down, you two. My father's right over there, so please keep it down."

"Understood."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll do my best."

Just like that, they begrudgingly ended the battle. At the very least, they seemed to be on the same wavelength.

Do they fight so easily because they can already understand each other? Erika wondered as she started walking again.

Wine and fruit juice were readily handed out all over town. People would clink their glasses while chanting, "Praise be to the angel." The adults, the children, the nobles, the commoners—people from all walks of life smiled and made their toasts.

Erika took an earthenware cup of fruit juice to join in. When she looked down, she saw a single petal floating on the surface of the liquid.

Oh, now that's a good omen.

As she was raising it to her lips, she was startled by the sudden clinking of a cup against hers.

“Praise be to the angel. Aren’t you glad that didn’t leave a scar? Good for you, Erika.”

“Aah! E-Eduard? When did you get here?”

“Just a moment ago. I spotted you playing around with a cat and a golem.”

Her face scrunched up at her brother’s sudden appearance. If she had been just a little slower in curtailing the phantasmic beasts, Eduard would have found her out.

When he glanced at Duke Aurelia, the duke nodded, leaving behind a few alchemist guards and taking his leave.

“I finally finished giving a full report to His Majesty. At long last, I can enjoy the festival with you.”

“What about Father?”

“It seems he also had business with His Majesty. From here on out, I’ll be your escort.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble.”

In contrast to her father’s hands-off approach, Eduard intended to guard her at close range. Erika worried whether this would put the identities of her two phantasmic friends in jeopardy. She was especially anxious about the cat, who appeared totally lovestruck as she gawked at the young man.

“It must be about your secret investigation, right? The one you and Claus were involved in?”

“That’s right. Aside from what I explained on the spot, there were all sorts of places where Louie’s faction was moving behind the scenes. I handed him over to Ignitians I knew I could trust.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Right after this, I’m going to have to escort Louie back to the Karkinos-Ignitia region and conduct an in-depth investigation there. My head’s spinning. If I

don't take a little breather, I'm going to collapse." Contrary to his words, Eduard's smile was practically brimming with vitality.

"That sounds tiresome."

Even if Eduard himself is more than up to the task, the investigation still sounds quite taxing. I hope he can regain some energy during his break.

"Come to think of it, why did you agree to take on a top-secret investigation?"

"It all started out when, hmm, let's see... You remember the collapse of the Seafarer's Ruins two months ago? I did a rough estimate on how much money I'd need to excavate the surrounding bedrock. And wouldn't you know it—the sum turned out to be at least ten times my pocket money."

"Th-That much, huh?" Erika was shocked. She had never imagined that the trap she'd set off would cause such massive damage. An awkward smile spread over her face as she hurriedly tried to conceal her unrest.

"It would be impossible to continue as the sole investor. You can't imagine how irritating it was, too. I'd just gotten the cooperation of Lindis' research team."

"That really is a shame."

"But that's when King Henri proposed a top-secret audit. I accepted on the condition that His Majesty would be a sponsor for my project."

"I see. If His Majesty takes part, the other Ignitian nobles should start investing as well."

Eduard wasn't one to stay down. He knew an opportunity when he saw it. "Precisely. Oh, but looking into Louie is going to take quite some time. Once that's over, I'd like to kick back and theorize about phantasmic beasts some more before I get to anything else."

"If only you could still enter the Seafarer's Ruins."

"If only. I'm not sure if it's any consolation, but I think I'm going to look into the Founding King's beloved pet cat, the Cath Palug."

"What?! Palug?!" Erika quite nearly dropped her cup in shock.

Palug herself perked up her ears and stared at Eduard.

“The truth is,” Eduard continued, “I heard an interesting story when I was looking into Louie.”

“A story, you say?”

“Ignitia has its own legends of ancient monsters. There are lions, leopards, cats—quite a wide variety, but they nearly all point to monsters of feline form. It just happened to catch my interest, so I used my free time to do some light digging into the remains of scattered legends. Then, I discovered a fascinating little tidbit.”

“What might that be?”

“There are countless names and forms recorded, but this legion of feline monsters might actually be just one single phantasmic beast.”

“It couldn’t be...”

“Imagine, a phantasmic beast that appears during all the big turning points of Ignitia’s history to lead young kings and heroes. If you try looking at it that way, the legends all look like part of a bigger picture. Interesting, isn’t it? Oh, and perhaps Prince August manifesting his latent abilities was also related to that beast.”

“Eduard, your wild imagination never fails to surprise me.”

Eduard’s insight was frighteningly accurate. No wonder Louie hadn’t been able to outrun Eduard, even though he had somehow managed to avoid detection up to that point.

“Making some breakthroughs in the field of Ignitia’s folklore isn’t a bad idea. It will make fundraising a little smoother, and I can raise a few more researchers who understand phantasmic beast research. Why, I don’t see how any of this could go wrong.”

“If you want to know about cat monsters, Prince August knows a thing or two.”

“Then I will definitely have to hear him out. I already need to probe into why he’s getting so close to you.”

Erika had to tilt her head at that. Come to think of it, they definitely had become friends at an alarming pace. From the point of view of a guardian, it must have been rather worrisome.

“No need to worry. There is nothing suspicious going on between us. August is my friend. We ran into one another by sheer coincidence at the Grand Cathedral and hit it off on the topic of old paintings.”

“A friend? Just a friend?”

“Yes, of cou—”

“Of course we’re not just *any old* friends!”

“Urk!”

Someone had suddenly linked arms with Erika. When she turned, she met a familiar violet gaze. August had changed from his riding clothes to his proper, royal uniform.

“Oh, hello, Your Highness. If you’re ‘not just any old friends,’ then what exactly is your relationship?” Eduard asked. “You mean best friends, don’t you?”

“That’s right, Erika is my *best* friend. At least, as far as you know, Mr. Eduard.”

“Now, that’s reassuring. Please, by all means, continue to be a good *friend* to Erika in times to come.”

They shared in their smiles. Despite the curl of their lips, an anxiety-inducing aura seemed to descend around them as they stared at each other in silence for a while. Sooner or later, August lost out to Eduard’s persistence and released Erika from his grip.

“Looks like I can’t make light of you, Sir Eduard.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Your Highness.”

The mood softened ever so slightly after those words.

Eventually, Goldberry showed up and landed on her master’s shoulder. She tossed the meat scrap she was chewing on into the air before catching it and swallowing it whole.

“There, there. Haven’t you eaten enough already?”

“Chrrrrr?”

“Fine, have it your way. Today’s special, but starting tomorrow, you have to show some moderation, or you’ll outgrow your wings.”

“Skreee.”

Goldberry nuzzled August’s cheek, her eyes narrowing and her tail twisting to and fro. As Erika was charmed by this quaint display, Goldberry looked in her direction and froze. Palug, who had escaped to Erika’s shoulder, froze as well. It seemed Goldberry’s eyes were fixed on the kitten.

“Oh... Oh dear. She still remembers. How could I have missed that?” Palug muttered, then jumped down and hid behind Erika’s skirt.

“You’re one foolish feline.”

“Kree? Chrrrr!”

This time, Goldberry looked at Tirnanog. The way she was acting seemed quite similar to how Palug had behaved when she’d first met Eduard. The dragon swiftly swooped down and stuck her forelimbs into the joints of his helmet.

“Hrm?!”

“Kreeeah?”

“Cease! Cease! I am golem! No one inside!”

The moment before his visor could be lifted, Tirnanog lurched back and took off, Goldberry hot on his heels. The small dragons were running in circles, and Palug was also dragged in before long. After doing several laps around Erika, the three beasts—two phantasmic—dived under a table and ran off.

“Hey, don’t bully them, Goldberry!”

“Don’t go too far, okay?”

By the time August and Erika had called out to them, they were already nowhere in sight.

“That dragon’s really taken a liking to your golem, Erika.”

“So it seems.”

“I’m also pretty curious to see how your golem works.”

“Oh, Eduard, I couldn’t possibly show you something so shoddy. I’ll die from embarrassment.”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

Erika averted her eyes. If her brother inspected it any closer, he would undoubtedly figure out what truly lay beneath.

“Huh? Is that Eduard I see? Hey!”

Just as Erika was mulling over how she’d play it off, a familiar voice reached her ears. She turned toward the source to see Elric with a large bundle in his hands. His glasses were crooked again. As Erika was deliberating whether or not she should tell him, Eduard’s hand shot out and promptly straightened them.

“You’re the same as ever, Elric.”

“My glasses were crooked? That’s odd, I never noticed. Sorry to bother you, Eduard.”

Judging by their exchange, Eduard and Elric seemed quite accustomed to one another. Or at least, Eduard was used to dealing with Elric.

“Oh, pardon me, I didn’t notice you were with Erika. Err... is that boy also a friend of yours? Wait, I know you; you’re Blackcurrent’s rider. Congratulations on your victory.”

Ultimately, August had been deemed the victor of the joust.

“I’m August, son of Henri. I remember seeing you inspecting the dragons before the match.”

“*You’re* Prince August? Oh, how rude of me not to notice. I am Elric Actorius, a school friend of Eduard over there.” Looking frazzled, Elric bowed to August.

“Elric, you could tell he was Blackcurrent’s rider but didn’t realize he was the prince?”

“We were pretty busy looking into Louie’s transgressions, so I never heard the name of the victor.”

“I’m sorry. It seems the actions of my extended family have caused the academy a fair bit of trouble.”

“Don’t even worry about it. This is all part of the job. I feel sorry for those two dragons of his, but we got some valuable data off of them.”

When the topic turned to Louie’s dragons, the joy faded from August’s face.

“What happened to Camellia and Sylvatica?”

“My apologies, but we are unable to save them at the moment. We extracted as many nails as possible, but we can’t do anything about the few that’ve been stuck in their vital organs. It irks me to say this, but our understanding of the biology of dragons is too incomplete. Additionally, the nails in their bodies were specially manufactured for dragons. They’re an unknown variety.”

“I see...”

“But this tragedy will never happen again. I swear, one day we will find a way to treat both of them.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m hoping for.”

These strong words of reassurance from the usually weak-willed Elric gave the prince a little peace of mind. A smile slowly returned to his face.

“Even so... Louie, was it? Quite a piece of work. How can anyone be so cruel to their own dragon? Did you see the report, Eduard? Over a hundred cursed nails centered on the spinal—”

“Elric, do you think that’s the right topic to discuss in broad daylight?”

Elric frantically covered his mouth.

“Louie never used to be that sort of guy. Do you reckon he wouldn’t have used those nails if he had enough cursed stirrups for all his competitors?” August muttered.

Eduard shook his head. “No, Your Highness. I personally don’t think Louie had anything to do with the stirrup.”

“Really? If that’s true, it’s a bit of a relief. We certainly didn’t get along, but I wouldn’t like to think he hated me enough to want to kill me.”

August closed his eyes, a hint of sorrow on his face. To an outsider, Louie was just a detestable stranger, but it seemed that wasn't the case for August.

"I didn't think you would take his side, Eduard. Did you find some evidence to the contrary?" Elric asked, rather perplexed.

"There are no new developments regarding the stirrup. We haven't found any material evidence apart from the stirrup itself. I have no intention of taking his side, but Louie had nothing to gain by setting that trap."

"Isn't it because he wanted to get rid of someone who was higher up in the order of royal succession? He could have made it look like an accident."

"That would only be possible if he'd known His Highness would take part in advance."

Elric tilted his head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"There were a number of highly promising candidates in the twenty-meter class. We only found one stirrup, and it was one of a kind. If it was placed to help someone win the tournament, why would it be on a generic dragon when there was no way of telling who would be riding her?"

"Do we at least have any leads on where the stirrup came from?" Erika inadvertently found herself asking. A terrible feeling of dread had come over her.

"Trace amounts of dirt were found in the grooves of its ornamentation. Once those are analyzed, we might know where it came from. We've sent an urgent notice to Hafan to have them collect dirt samples from a few specific locations."

August looked around, then lowered his voice to ask, "Sir Eduard, does this mean you're working under the assumption that this has to do with the grave desecrations?"

The prince was referring to the graves that'd been dug up in Hafan. Erika recalled that they were graves from the bygone era of the vampyre country, Casquetia. If the stirrup had come from a ravaged tomb, then it was possible this was yet another incident caused by a cursed tool of Casquetia.

It was all too well orchestrated for it to be mere coincidence.

“I don’t know for sure. But if we want to rule out the worst-case scenario, we’d better do it fast.”

“No doubt about that. If it spreads that this had to do with vampyres, it will surely make the people of Hafan and Lucanlandt anxious. They are our precious, sworn comrades. We should guarantee their reprieve as soon as possible.”

“Yes, that was precisely what King Henri said. You really do take after him. Has anyone ever told you that?”

A faint, rosy hue bloomed on August’s cheeks. There was a proud air about him as he did his best to stifle a smile.

Elric nodded again and again during their exchange, all while undoing the binding of his parcel. What emerged was the sinister set of stirrups in question. “If they’re that important, we’ll have to take care that no one steals them.”

“So you were the one carrying them. I did hear they were in the custody of an academy magician, but... at least take some guards with you. That’s far too careless.”

“Don’t look at me. The other alumni were all occupied. I don’t know too many people from Ignitia, so I don’t know who to ask.”

Eduard’s eyes went to Erika, then to August, then back to Erika before he heaved a sigh. “You’re in luck, Elric. I happen to know one skilled alchemist who’s available. Your Highness, I’ll be back at once, but while I’m gone, you’d best look after my little sister. There’s a chance someone malicious is still lurking on the island.”

“As you wish, sir. I swear I’ll protect her till death do us part.”

“Hahaha, good one. I’ll be back in no time. Hurry up, Elric. There’s no time to lose.”

“What?! Wait for me!”

Eduard gleefully knocked down August’s straight-faced joke before taking his leave. Behind him, Elric nearly tripped several times on air as he frantically gave chase.

Erika felt rather amazed by her brother’s unnatural level of attachment to his

sister as she watched on like it didn't concern her whatsoever.

"Looks like he's got a lot on his plate."

"Looks like it."

"Oh, I almost forgot. Praise be to the angel."

"Praise be to the angel."

August nicked a cup from a nearby stand and held it up. Erika tapped hers against it, offering her praise to the kitten that had fled a moment ago.

"And... to my goddess of fortune as well."

"You're welcome."

August pressed the hand that wasn't holding the cup against Erika's cheek.

"I'm glad it didn't leave a mark."

"Thankfully, the healer's skills were the real deal. I quite nearly ended up scarred for life."

"Hahaha. If that happened, I guess I'd have to marry you to make amends."

"You must be careful with what you say. If word gets around that you make passes that easily, you'll be flooded by hopefuls in no time."

"No need to worry; I'll only ever say that to you. That should solve the problem."

August's big, beautiful eyes were wide open. He stared at her with a tilt of his head. Erika felt something somewhat catlike about his gesture.

Come to think of it, he was like that in Liber Monstrorum too.

In the game, he would approach someone on a whim, then turn tail and run the moment they tried to grow closer to him. This flighty way of treating others made him seem like a mistrustful cat that craved affection.

Being real here, if August develops a habit of seducing, it will cause him a lot of trouble someday. Erika hesitated over how to respond. What was the right approach to remonstrating him as a friend?

"That's not what I meant. The problem here is that I'm not able to reject you

no matter how much I want to.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“If I say no, it will tarnish your reputation. Granted, it’s already pretty tarnished by now, but haven’t things started to change?”

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

“Even if it’s just a verbal contract, I can’t possibly turn it down. Knowing that, would you still propose marriage?” Erika took his stare head-on, gazing back with complete sincerity.

After a few moments, August shrugged. “You got me. Let’s pretend that never happened. That’s not what I should say to a precious friend.”

“You’ll have more and more friends before long, so you must watch what you say. Not to mention, if you’re seriously looking for a partner, you’ll have to take Ignitia’s national interest into account.”

“Aaah, power, power, power. What good is it anyway? What a pain.” August jokingly pretended to sulk. A slightly risky move, coming from the crown prince.

The next moment, a sudden sea breeze picked up Erika’s hair. As Erika scrambled to contain the golden locks shrouding her vision, her hair brushed up against August’s hand. His fingers intertwined with her ringlets, which brought a golden glimmer to his eyes. It was as if all his mischief had been carried off by the wind, leaving only the smile on his lips.

“Erika, if I were still the tarnished prince of scandals, would you—”

Before he could finish, however, Claus arbitrarily inserted himself between the two of them.

“Hold on a minute, you two! What are you doing?!”

In that brief instant, August’s expression was covered up by a thick, smiling mask, his half-finished words disappearing beyond his lips.

“What? Why, I was talking to a precious friend,” he replied.

“Same to you, Claus. What are you doing?” Erika chimed in.

“No seriously, what *are* you doing, Claus?”

In no time at all, Anne was standing behind him. She offered a slight curtsy to Erika before instructing an attendant to clean up the cup her brother had tossed aside.

Claus made a sour face, retreated a few steps, and stared at his hand. “What *was* I doing?”

“How lamentable. Get a grip, would you, Claus?”

Brother and sister held their heads together.

Looks like they’re getting along as well as ever, Erika mused. “I’m sorry I had you running around a bit. Thank you, and good work.”

“Yeah, same here. I’m glad your wound closed up.”

“No need to worry, it was just a scratch.”

“I just can’t stand seeing you hurt. So I did it for me. It’s not like I was worried about you.” Claus bashfully averted his eyes and took a new cup from a waiter. Erika touched her cup to his without delay.

“Praise be to the angel. Anyway, that’s one case closed.”

“Yes, praise be to that angel or whatever. Eduard and I still have work to do, so I’m just on a short break.”

“That sounds rough.”

“You don’t know the half of it. So, at the very least, I’d like to spend this time with—”

“Praise be to the angel! What a horrible boy you are, Claus. Ignoring me when I’m right in front of you.”

This time, August stepped between Erika and Claus, holding out his cup. Unseen sparks seemed to fly between Claus, in his blatant disgust, and August, beaming with excitement.



“August, is it? Looks like your disgraceful rumors went away. Good for you.”

“In no lesser part thanks to you.”

“To me, it doesn’t matter whether the rumors are real or false. I don’t care what sort of person you are.”

Claus glared at August with such fire in his eyes that he was reaching the point of insolence. At first glance, it looked as if August had once again calmly let it slide, but his eyes were not laughing at all.

“What’s your relationship with Erika?”

“We’re friends. Very dear friends. So, what’s *your* story?”

“To me, Erika is a precious... friend.”

“Hmm. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend,’ as they say. Now, what shall I call the friend of my friend?”

“Who knows?”

Claus and August exchanged a strong handshake.

“Very well, August. It seems we will have to reluctantly put up with one another for a detestably long time to come.”

“It will be a pleasure, I’m sure. Don’t expect me to pull any punches.”

“I’m glad you made another friend, August. I’m also glad you finally found that rival you wanted, Claus,” Erika optimistically blurted, watching over their thinly veiled exchange as though it were of no consequence to her.

“Hmm, is that what it looks like to you?”

“What do you take me for, Erika?”

August and Claus could not believe the extent of her obliviousness. Anne took this opportunity to step out from behind Claus.

“Oh, I’m sorry, little lady,” said August, “I seem to have neglected to introduce myself. I’m August, son of Henri. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“A stronger foe than I’d expected. Very well. I’ll do my best to get rid of you,” Anne returned cheerfully. The prince’s smile froze. “I am Anne of House Hafan.

My brother has been most disrespectful to you. Praise be to the angel.”

“Praise be to the angel. How should I put this? Like brother, like sister.”

Glancing back at August as he faltered, Anne slid right up to Erika’s side.

“Erika, dearest, I’m glad you’re okay. Praise be to the angel.”

“Yes, praise be to the angel. I’ve caused you trouble yet again, Anne. Though you might not remember it.”

“If it’s about your *guardian beast*, I remember well enough.”

Erika inadvertently did a double-take. Perhaps that had been outside the scope of Palug’s memory alterations. Anne had met Tirnanog, but she was unrelated to Palug. All Palug had really done was modify her own oblivion curse to alter the memories of some events, so it wouldn’t be strange if Anne had been completely unaffected.

“I see he protected you as promised, so I must offer him my thanks. Do you think he’d like some Hafan produce?”

“Err, Anne, if you could, please keep him a secret.”

“Of course I will. I’m not going to play that card so easily. That would be such a waste.” She smirked as she pinched her skirt and curtsied. “Well then, everyone, there are still people I must pay my respects to, so if you will excuse me. Claus, I’m borrowing the guards.”

“Go ahead. It’s not like they’re stronger than me.”

“Take your time.” With an impish look on her face, Anne made off with all their attendants.

“Incidentally, what were you talking about? What’s this about a guardian beast?”

“How boorish, Claus. Didn’t you hear? It’s apparently a lady’s secret.” Claus had asked Erika, only for August to step in and answer instead.

“You see something being covered up right before your eyes, and it doesn’t make you the least bit curious?”

“You just don’t get it. Keeping secrets secret is what makes them so

charming.” With a hostile smile, August combed the tips of Erika’s hair with his fingers. He toyed with her curls as if to show off, his fingers entwining with her ringlets.

Claus must have been considerably surprised, as the earthenware cup crumbled in his hand. “How am I supposed to get that? And stop moving your hand like that. It’s pissing me off.”

“Oh, what a short fuse you have, Claus. Unfortunately for you, I don’t think your fist will ever reach me.”

“Try saying that again when you’re flat on the ground.”

“You’re going to cause trouble for people, so please keep this in moderation, both of you.”

With August fleeing circles around her and Claus giving chase, Erika felt a sense of déjà vu. August truly seemed to be having fun, and as for Claus, he’d broken into a half-smile before he knew it.

The people of the royal capital warmly watched over their playful prince and his new friend.

To think August could laugh so naturally when everyone’s watching.

Erika felt just a little proud of her own efforts as she secretly raised a glass to everyone who had contributed. And just like that, night peacefully descended on the Adventmas feast.

August Ignitia's Journal

Start of April, 1877 H.C.E. (Holy Crown Era)

One dragon hatched. The other two won't stir, and I heard the adults say it is a bad omen.

I wanted to disappear, so I hid in the secret room.

Do you think angels really exist?



August could hear Louie and the others calling his name. He ignored them and ran further and further into the Grand Cathedral. Whenever he wanted to be alone, he would always find himself here. There were plenty of places for him to hide.

It was a blessed day. His eggs hadn't stirred for many years, but finally, one had hatched. While this would usually be cause for celebration, tensions were high, as none of his riding dragons showed any sign of hatching. What was a dragoon king without a dragon to ride?

Unable to bear this atmosphere, young August had run away. He'd set his sights on the room that housed the painting of the One True God. Someone had once told him about the hidden stairs that lay beneath it.

That man had been his quiet, much older cousin. He had always been the only person who could find August when the boy was hiding in the Grand Cathedral.

"In the deepest chamber, if you push the carvings on the pillars in the order of lion, ox, man, and eagle, the floor will open right beneath God. You should hide there if you really don't want to run into anyone."

That's what he had told August before he'd returned to the Academy of Magic in Lindis.

I'm sure he had quite a few days when he didn't want to meet anyone himself, August thought as he reflected on his cousin.

The man had been adopted into another family. The convoluted story of his birth had made it so that his very existence had never been made public. August's other cousin, Louie, didn't even know they were related. The man had apparently found the stairs when he was searching for the Beast of Contracts. If miracles were real, he'd said, he had a wish he wanted granted.

Unfortunately, he had been unable to open the door at the bottom of the stairs. He hadn't managed to enter the room where the Beast of Contracts slumbered.

But maybe you can pull it off, he'd told August.

August made sure no one noticed him as he snuck through the winding corridors. Finally, he reached the deepest room. When he did just as his cousin had instructed, the floor beneath the mural shifted right before his eyes, revealing a set of stairs to a lower level. He locked the door from the inside before he started down the spiral staircase.

He leaned his back against the lone door at the very bottom, sitting and hugging his knees. These were the depths of the earth, yet it felt somewhat warm and gave off the soft scent of a sunny day. As he closed his eyes, many people's faces crossed his mind.

The strained expressions of his father and mother as they'd tried to console him. The flicker of anxiety that had crossed Louie's face before he'd plastered on an awkward smile. August hardly knew Louie's stepbrother, Charles, yet that man prayed for him even more than Louie did.

Louie had told him he could always ride *his* dragons if the eggs never hatched. Despite knowing his proposal came of kindness and not malice, August had still turned it down.

August could have endured if all he had to deal with was the disappointment and distrust from strangers. However, he couldn't bear the kindness of those close to him, nor could he stand his own cynicism as he rejected their goodwill.

A drop hit August's hand. At some point, he had begun to cry. If he stayed here, at the depths of the earth, would he be able to live without hurting or being hurt?

I'll cry on my own for a bit, and when the tears run out, I'll climb back up.

He cried until he was worn thin, and he had cried himself asleep.

Around an hour passed. In his dreamy state of mind, he heard a song. *What a gentle voice*, he thought. It was a song that carried a sense of nostalgia and a hint of sorrow.

Before he knew it, someone was in front of him, singing a tune as they stroked his cheek.

"Mother?" August asked, his mind still in a haze.

"No. I am not your mother."

August lifted his face. As his mind rapidly kicked into gear, he recalled that he had come to a place no one else should've been able to enter.

The one he saw was a blonde woman wearing a red dress in the style of the southern continent. He was only meeting her for the first time, yet he was overcome with the feeling he'd known her for a long time now.

"Good morning, pretty-faced little one."

"Who are you?"

"Mmheehee, who could I be? At the very least, I've never been a mother before."

August could feel his face heat up. The woman's skin was quite tan, completely different from his mother's fair shade. Even her voice was nowhere close. How could he have made such a mistake? He was growing increasingly embarrassed.

"You may call me Palug."

"I'm... August."

Ignoring the hand the woman called Palug held out for him, August sullenly rubbed the remnants of tears away with his sleeve.

"That's not your real name. That name belongs to Cath Palug, the cat the Founding King kept."

"Oh dear, you know your stuff. That was a long time ago." Palug chuckled—a

low, rumbling, throaty laugh.

“Everyone in this country knows that. They say it could understand human tongue, walked on two legs, and wore boots, among other things. It’s in all sorts of fairy tales.” August glanced down at Palug’s legs. She was barefoot. “If you want to call yourself Palug, shouldn’t you at least get that much right?”

“How many centuries do you think it’s been since I got those boots? They wore out a long time ago.”

Come to think of it, she had a point. Even if the real Cath Palug was here, who was to say it would still wear boots?

“More importantly, why are you down here? No one’s supposed to be able to enter.”

“I can go anywhere on this island. I’ll always be by the side of a crying child. Protecting children is a part of my job, after all.”

“It’s not like you’re the cat-eyed saint. Stop messing with me.”

On Ynys Negesydd, where August lived, there was a legend of a saint who protected children. To share in the fortune promised by the tale, even now, the stores sold charms made of a gemstone called cat’s eye.

“Right. Maybe ‘everywhere’ was an exaggeration. There might be a few places I can’t go.”

“You called yourself Palug a moment ago, but now you’re pretending to be the saint?”

“A woman has many faces, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

When she replied so triumphantly, how was August expected not to laugh?

“There, you finally smiled. You’re so much cuter when you’re smiling.”

“Shut up. You’re not supposed to call a boy cute.”

After talking to Palug, August realized his heart felt quite a bit lighter. It was so much easier talking to people who didn’t know who he was. Once she learned he was royalty, surely Palug wouldn’t interact with him so casually.

“What about you, August? What brings you down here?”

“I wanted to get away from people, so I came somewhere I thought no one else could go. I must have been mistaken.”

“Hmm. I’m not a person, per se, so you should be fine around me.”

“What’s with that logic? Oh, right... I also heard the Beast of Contracts might be around here,” August said, recalling his cousin’s words.

“My, you came all the way here to see me? I’ve been getting so few visitors these days. It’s been so lonely.”

“I won’t let you mock the Beast of Contracts. I’m sure you’ve never even heard of it before!” All of a sudden, August flew into a rage, taking Palug by surprise. “The Beast of Contracts is the strongest phantasmic beast I know of. It’s a monster that rivals God himself, granting true miracles to whoever can overcome its trials. I’ll have you know, if the legends are to be believed, Ignitia only exists thanks to the Beast of Contracts. Had the beast never helped out my ancestors, I probably wouldn’t exist. I won’t forgive anyone who speaks ill of it.”

After blinking a few times, Palug grinned wide.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. Mmheehee. I never thought I’d meet someone who treasured the Beast of Contracts to such a degree. It’s a little reassuring.”

“Good grief, you really are a strange one.”

His venom had been drained, and before he knew it, August couldn’t even find it within himself to be angry.

“Did you have a wish for the Beast of Contracts? You don’t look like you’re in need of wealth or youth.”

“I don’t need that. All I want is the future everyone dear to me longs for. If I can make that happen, I wouldn’t even regret failing the trial and being devoured.”

“How admirable. Sorry to say, but we’re fresh out of miracles here.”

“Haha. So, even miracles can run out of stock?”

“Yes, that’s right. Thus, you don’t have to be a sacrifice for anyone else. I’m sure those people you hold dear would be sad if they lost you.”

Her words were kind and warm, and far too convenient to be true. Just how much better off would he be if that really were the case? August hung his head for a while.

“Even so, I was sure entities like me had been completely forgotten, but there are still strange people like you. I guess living a long life has its perks.”

“It’s not just me. The other people of this country haven’t forgotten either. They’ve believed for centuries. In God, in angels, in saints, in the Beast of Contracts. We remember all the entities who’ve offered us salvation.”

As August spoke, he found it hard to determine whether the face Palug made was happy or sad.

“I’m not even the only one who knows about this place. I heard about it from my cousin. I’m sure he’s seriously searching for the Beast of Contracts. Hey, if a new miracle comes in, and you only get one of them, you should give it to him instead of me. I don’t know why, but he always looks even more cornered than I do.”

“By cousin, do you mean the one with the black hair and glasses?”

“You know him?”

“I’ve seen him before. But he couldn’t see me. That man probably only came here to prove that miracles don’t exist.”

Why had he looked that way to Palug? August hadn’t the slightest idea, but he did recall the dark and grim expression that had occasionally crossed his cousin’s modest face.

“Perhaps that means he doesn’t really need a miracle?”

“That’s right. I can tell. I mean, that’s the way God made me,” Palug answered, sounding somewhat proud of herself.

August had been looking for an actual answer, and that was enough to make him lose the motivation to pursue the matter of his cousin any further.

“Good grief... Who are you, really?”

“Let’s see. I was once called the greatest of angels.”

He sneered at that response. “You should’ve started out with that. Then, perhaps, I’d have let myself be deceived.”

“Oh my, what a mistake. If we ever meet again, I’ll say it from the start.”

The faint sound of the evening bell reached his ears.

“It’s already this late?”

“Come again if you want. You can always find me here.”

“Yeah, yeah. Maybe, if I get the chance.” He gave a half-baked reply before turning his back to her.

No one would normally be able to enter the deepest chamber of the Grand Cathedral. Only high-ranking pastors and royalty were free to come and go. Otherwise, one really would have to be an angel, a saint, or a legendary beast to get in.

Come to think of it, where exactly did Palug enter from? The question suddenly occurred to him. Don’t tell me she really is an angel?

He heard the sound of a heavy stone door opening. A soft, orange light streamed out from behind him. By the time he turned around, the door to the sealed room was already firmly shut, and Palug was nowhere to be seen.



Some Day in May, 1877 H.C.E.

I asked her about angels. Apparently, once you know who they truly are, the angel’s an angel no longer. I asked her why that was, but she didn’t know. Even if you see the angel, she says you should pretend not to notice.

What’s her problem? She’s the one who called herself an angel before.

She’s hopeless, so I’ll play along with her farce.

If only I had someone who would pretend they didn’t know who I was.

Some Time in January, 1878 H.C.E.

Is there any point in the existence of a dragoon who can't ride a dragon through the sky?

She replied, "Is there any point in the existence of an angel who can't hear out wishes?"

Answering a question with a question is just unfair.

Lately, I hang out in the Grand Cathedral whenever anything bad happens.

Once Upon a Time in June, 1880 H.C.E.

I saw a small light. A little alchemist who says she came from the west.

When I asked her, she assured me this is love. But summing up this feeling with that one word seems a little wrong. Will that star on the horizon ever come down to me?



August leaned against the pillar of the Grand Cathedral alone. He relied on the few strands of light leaking into the gloomy interior to flip through the journal in his hands.

After the ruckus that had taken place on that day of the joust, August had felt a bizarre discrepancy in his own memories. A faint, off sensation, and a deep sense of loss.

He had searched for the answer to this loneliness, which he couldn't simply ascribe to his imagination—and upon reading over his journal, he had finally found it.

"An angel, huh?"

His journal documented conversations with an unknown individual, including arguments, tall tales from the underside of history, and advice on how to interact with dragons.

The name and identity of this individual remained wholly obscured. However, his description of their first meeting, her vast knowledge of theology, and her believable, firsthand accounts of events that had taken place centuries ago pointed to this person being a real angel.

How absurd.

It would've been more realistic for him to think of her as some imaginary friend he had made up to endure his harsh environment. To him, she had at times been a sister, at times a teacher, at times a friend. However, August couldn't possibly consider her fictional. The woman in the journal had known things he couldn't have known, and she had taken actions he could never have imagined.

Surely there had been a real angel here, once upon a time. But there was no one here any longer.

Loneliness and longing filled his heart. August closed the journal and felt out the emptiness left by a friend he could no longer remember.

"Mew?"

A carefree cat's cry broke through the gloomy atmosphere. By the time he knew it, a golden cat had come up to his leg.

"Huh? You're here alone? Are you lost?"

August stuck his hands under the cat's front legs and lifted it up. Perhaps he was just tired, as he found his face relaxing when he saw its body stretch out a lot more than he expected.

"I feel like I've seen you somewhere before. Do you belong to someone I know?"

"Mrow?"

The cat favorably narrowed its eyes and let him do as he liked. It was a charming cat with no fear of humans. On closer inspection, there was a leather strap around its neck.

As August lifted the cat higher to get a better look, the bell on its collar chimed. A star and a wave were etched into the metal.

"Oh, no wonder. I knew I'd seen you before."

"Meow."

It slipped through his arms like magic and landed on the floor without a

sound. August turned to see where the cat had run off to.

“Good day, August.”

A girl stood under the vivid torrent of light flooding through the stained glass. She was the daughter of Duke Aurelia. As the light reflected off her honey-colored hair, it formed a radiant halo around her.

She faintly smiled as her gaze met August's. Her green eyes, the color of the sea just over a shoal, were beautiful yet ice-cold. She wore a prudish dress that covered all the way to her neck, its ultramarine color reminiscent of the night sky.

Her stiff, nearly inorganic looks and her nunlike, austere atmosphere harmonized well with the sacred grounds on which they stood.

“Hello, Erika.”

“You were playing with my cat, I see. Thank you.”

“I'm quite fond of cats. I like the way they don't drop their guard even when you hold them, and how you can never know what they're thinking.”

“I can kind of understand that.”

As she nodded and reached out her hand, the cat smoothly slipped past it. August and Erika exchanged a look, then shared a wry smile.

Erika's a bit like a cat, August thought. She would lurk close enough to take him by surprise, only to slip away if he tried to grab her. She was highly wary, and just when it seemed she had opened up, her heart remained safely behind a tightly closed door.

She never showed her hand, yet her eyes seemed to see everyone's true intentions. Whimsical, reserved, and aloof.

To August, who had lived while rejecting others, he quite liked the sense of distance she maintained.

“I don't often see you without your golem.”

“He should be here soon. There was a painting over there he really took a liking to.”

“That’s quite a sophisticated golem you have.”

“Of course. I simply designed him that way to make it seem like he has a will of his own.”

“Hmm, you’re quite meticulous.”

As the two of them gossiped, the golem appeared with a large bag in tow. The bag was apparently crammed full of wands and other magical tools.

Noticing its footsteps, Goldberry, who had been sleeping against the carvings by the skylight, opened her eyes. When she jumped down to August’s shoulders, the golem twitched as if it were cowering in fear.

August held his dragon down before she could take another leap.

“Goldberry, that’s not how a proper lady behaves.”

Goldberry nodded, then flew over to a spot several steps from the golem. She slowly approached it, then calmly spread her wings in an elegant bow.

After observing her for a few seconds, the golem lowered its head back.

“Your golem astounds me no matter how many times I see it.”

“You can do amazing things with modern technology. Believe me.”

“Well then, now that we’re all here, let’s get going. Err, the place I wanted to show you is gone. I wouldn’t mind taking you anywhere you want to go.”

“Yes, I’m counting on you.”

Now that Adventmas had ended, a peculiar gloom lingered in the air on Ynys Negesydd, but August had learned to relish in that mood. *Though I can only hope Erika takes a liking to it too*, he thought as he walked.

He heard the sound of something falling behind him. When he turned, his eyes suddenly met with the cat’s. August’s journal had fallen page-down in front of it.

“Meow?”

“Oh, it must have fallen from my pocket. I’m sorry. Did I startle you?”

August retrieved his journal and casually scanned the page it had fallen on. He

stared at what was supposed to be a blank page, completely still.

“Did something happen?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

August tucked the journal away and urged Erika on. Only the cat noticed the loss and sorrow fading from his face.



The Day After Adventmas, 1880 H.C.E.

Today, I showed Erika around town. I’m looking forward to the day I see her again.

As it turns out, that troublesome angel just hid herself away. She’s still watching over people like she used to.

You can already fly on your own.

May your hands reach the stars someday.

Last Chapter: Where the Sun Sets

The carriages bearing the emblem of House Aurelia raced down the bridge. It hadn't been long since high tide, and a thin layer of seawater still stuck fast to the surface of the stone pavement. The sea spray kicked up by the wheels glimmered gold in the setting sun.

Palug gazed at the shrinking sight of Ynys Negesydd from the window. The island towered like a fortress, its deep shadow looming over the ocean. On this island were so many traces of an angel.

This was where she had tied herself down for centuries. A place where so many of her memories lay. A place that had once been the home she had always returned to.

"I was always destined to be forgotten. Even so, my new freedom doesn't feel so bad. That very freedom is what lets me bask in the sorrows of parting," she said to no one in particular.

The sun sank lower on the horizon with every passing second, painting the world in new colors on its way out. The sea around the island shone a vibrant gold, and the sky above flickered with fiery hues. More so than any other, the sight of the bright-red sun melting into the waves pulled at Palug's heartstrings.

"Farewell, my God, my king, my people—and farewell, my prince."

Her soft goodbyes faded into the salty sea breeze.

Tirnanog snorted. *"Quit being so melodramatic, cat."*

"But I'm being abducted to the westernmost reaches of the land. I'll barely be able to see August anymore. I'm so lonely I could die."

The golden-furred cat squirmed and thrashed on the carriage seat. It had been ten minutes since they had set off, and they were still on the bridge that connected the island to the mainland. It was a bit early for homesickness.

"In another six years, I'll enroll in the Academy of Magic in Lindis. Why don't

you come with me then?" Erika suggested.

"Eureka! I forgot about the academy!"

As if her powerlessness had been a complete act, Palug hopped up and down.

"She'll probably be halfway useful in working out that prophecy of yours."

Erika responded with a subdued nod.

"A prophecy? What's that about? Is something about to happen?"

"I received a revelation of a potential future I would like to avoid. This revelation took the form of a vision from eyes that were not my own. The only place I saw was Lindis. It was set six years from now, and it only covered a very short span of time."

"That's quite a restrictive prophecy. How do you know if it's going to be useful or not?"

"It already has been. I was able to predict this incident thanks to what I gleaned from the vision."

"Though it didn't contain a word about an angel like you lurking about."

August would fall from his dragon in the tournament, and Erika would publicly humiliate him for it. Once cornered, August would fuse with the Beast of Contracts to gain dragon-riding abilities. Those were the only snippets of information on the Adventmas incident she had gotten from the game.

Why did it turn out like this, then? Erika asked herself. *Come to think of it, the name of the case that was supposed to happen in six years was the Androphagi Angel Incident. I thought it was named so because it took place at the Feast of the Angel, but to think a real angel was out there eating people...*

"So it's just because you had a revelation? That's all it took for you to try to save August? After so many near-death experiences? Just how much of a pushover can you be?!" Palug was practically snapping at her. Her fangs were bared, and her anger was on full display. A cat's face could be surprisingly expressive.

"I have a proper reason. If I hadn't stopped August from fusing with you, I would've been eaten alive. Slaughtered rather miserably by what was left of

you after you'd used up all your power."

Palug blinked, then blankly stared at Erika. After pondering the matter for a few seconds, she tilted her head quizzically. "In that case, just don't enroll in the academy. Problem solved."

"Urk. Now that you mention it, she's right."

"I did consider that, but... y'know, if I don't, then someone else will just be eaten in my place."

"Sure, maybe. I'll give you that. In that case, shouldn't you have used my miracle to avoid such a fate?"

"That also crossed my mind, but y'know, I already had quite a few reliable allies, so you looked like you needed it more than me."

At this remark, Tirnanog and Palug exchanged a look.

"Hey, I think there's something wrong with this kid."

"Indeed. On this matter alone, I share your sentiment."

They began whispering to one another, stealing frequent glances at Erika. She heard words like "unfathomable" and "gullible," which didn't sit well with her at all. It made her feel like they were chastising her for her thoughtless actions.

"So, erm, anyway, according to my prophecy, there are another five incidents that will result in my death. From here on, you might see Tir and I doing crazy things, but I ask that you please turn a blind eye."

"It has to do with the life of my precious friend. I won't take no for an answer."

"Hmm, I see. Right. If that's how things are, you really do leave me no choice."

Erika's request and Tirnanog's threat solidified Palug's resolve. Hoisting herself up with vigor, she stood on her hind legs, tapping her right forelimb on her chest.

"I'll lend a hand. The more the merrier, right?"

"I can't ask you to do that. You should treasure yourself more."

"Don't count me out just yet. I'll admit, I'm pretty weak at the moment, so

combat is pushing it. But won't you need someone who can act in a more refined and delicate way, unlike the serpent over there?"

Erika did need every bit of help she could get, so such a generous offer was *mew-sic* to her ears. Especially when it was coming from a *fur-midable* divine beast.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes. You saved my life, so I offer it to you."

"Wait, that's way too heavy. I don't need your life."

"Hmm, got it. I'll help out a bit when I'm not busy admiring the blond hottie. That sound better?"

"Oi, cat, now we have the opposite problem."

"Fine, I'll try again. I-It's not like I'm doing it for you. It's all for my precious August, okay?"

"Sure. I don't really get it, but that sounds about right?"

"Are you sure about that, Erika?"

While Tirnanog seemed quite fed up, Erika was smiling happily.

How can I lose when I have the largest dragon in the world and the strongest former angel on my side? It was a bit concerning that both were far from their full strength, but that was more than enough for now.

"Now that that's settled, I'd like you to fetch me some clothes. There's a limit to what I can do as a cat."

"Got it. What clothes would you like?"

"Let's start with two sets of men's clothes, and two sets for women. The first of each should be like a merchant's and the second like a noble's. The most important thing I need is a set of boots that fit my feet just right."

With that, Palug abruptly took on human form, holding out her legs as if to show them off. Erika hurriedly pulled down the curtain. She doubted anyone was watching, but she could never truly be sure.

"Don't act so unsightly. If her pet cat isn't properly disciplined, it is Erika who

will face ridicule."

"Oh, what a noisy snake." Palug returned to kitten form and sullenly looked away.

"Can't the two of you get along just a *little* better?"

"You want me to what? Even if you're the one asking, there are some things in the world that just weren't meant to be."

"Hrm? But I'm always being so courteous to you."

"What part of any of that was courteous?"

"At least show some gratitude. I could've easily killed you back there."

"You're going to regret that you didn't."

Carrying on with that foreboding exchange, the two phantasmic beasts raced around the narrow cabin interior. Erika watched over them warmly.

Their carriage raced on, scattering golden mist. The lonely cat was bound for a land where no one would know her. But she wouldn't be forgotten again. She could surely make it, even in the distant west, where the sun sank beyond the waves.

Records of Eduard Aurelia

❖ Historio Electrum

Classification: Black

Class Number: 0004

Date: 1880/07/01

Location: Reconquista, Karkinos-Ignitia. Prison tower in the margrave's estate.



The stone room was divided in two by sturdy iron bars. In such a dingy space, it was hard to tell night from day. The floor was gritty and the air was dry.

At the moment, two people occupied this room. On one side of the bars, Louie Ode-Ignitia sat in a simple chair. On the other side, a scribe bearing the crest of the Ignitian royal family observed him with pen and paper in hand.

A heavy, metal door swung open, heralding three new entrants: Eduard Aurelia, Elric Actorius, and Claus Hafan. Louie glanced at them from the corner of his eye. Soon, the scribe stood and left the room to give them space.

Eduard grabbed the chair the scribe had been using, placing it right in front of Louie before taking a seat. Elric and Claus remained standing a little farther back, right and left of Eduard respectively. Elric blotted his brow with a handkerchief while Claus restlessly used his sleeve to rub off the sweat dripping down his jaw.

Strangely, neither Eduard nor Louie were sweating in the slightest; they both maintained perfect composure.

"Hmm, so it's your turn today, Eduard Aurelia. You're wasting your time. My testimony will remain the same, no matter how many times you repeat your questions."

"I'm sorry that I have to betray your expectations, but today, I'm not here to interrogate you on your crimes."

“Oh?” Louie’s face turned grim.

Claus knit his brow, scowling at Eduard. “Oi, Eduard—”

“It’s nothing to worry about, Claus. Just do as we discussed. All that’s changed is the topic of our interrogation.” Eduard handed him an amber pellet about the size of a bean.

Swallowing his half-finished words, Claus began his incantation. His spell cards spread to cover the entirety of the room, giving off a faint glow reminiscent of moonlight. His protective circle was complete, successfully linked to the Historio Electrum—a stone used to keep records.

He stacked a few more spells, such as Glámr-Sight, on top of this. These would add new layers to the information observed and recorded.

Elric similarly readied a long staff and spell cards. Once he was prepared to cast at any time, he and Eduard exchanged a look.

“You’re putting on quite a show today. What are you going to do to me?”

“We’re just going to have a bit of a chat. You don’t have to be so tense. Right, how are you adjusting to your new life?”

“Oh, you’re here to laugh at me? You must be just as bored as I am.” Louie glared at him, rocking back in his simple chair. “How am I supposed to adjust to this? It’s the worst. The ventilation’s terrible, it’s all dusty, and it’s way too hot. The meals are god-awful, and the bed is hard as a rock. Who do you think I am? Why haven’t you guys been tried and hanged for treason yet?”

“Unfortunately, your kingdom extends no further than those iron bars. I’d advise against dragging your delusions beyond them.”

Louie clicked his tongue. “Delusions? You’re the one who needs to look at reality, Eduard.”

“Hmm. There appears to be a discrepancy between your reality and mine. Would you mind explaining what you make of reality?”

“Very well. Open your ears, and use your head. The same goes for you sycophants behind him. I’ll explain it so even a complete fool could understand who it is you should be following.” Louie leaned forward, chair and all. In

hushed tones, he continued, “Let’s get one thing straight. I am the legitimate heir to Ignitia.”

Eduard shrugged. “I’ve grown quite tired of that assertion.”

“You simply can’t comprehend it; that’s why I wind up repeating it again and again. I feel a bit sorry for you. Today, my accursed brother isn’t here, and you drove Henri’s scribe away. I’ll make a special exception and tack on some vital tidbits that will help you make the right judgment.”

“I see. Let’s hope not all of your stories are so boring.”

“You won’t just be amazed; you’ll be begging for forgiveness. What I’m about to tell you is a story of the dark side of Ignitia.” Louie paused for a moment, shaping his lips into a smile before going on. “You see, Eduard, I hold you in slightly higher esteem than I do the other fools. You may not be as good as me, but you’re skilled at what you do. Once you hear what I’m about to say, I know you’ll side with me.”

Eduard silently urged him on.

“I have unshakable evidence to back my claim that King Henri is a usurper. Given my current situation, I can’t say it in front of fools dancing in the palms of those in power. Naturally, not a word of this is to leave this room.”

“Very well. I swear to God. My lips are sealed.”

“A man who doesn’t have even an iota of faith shouldn’t swear to God so lightly. Swear to what’s dearest to you.”

Eduard was silent for the next ten-odd seconds. Then he lifted a hand and took his oath. “I swear on the life of my beloved sister, Erika Aurelia.”

“Alright. Go on, you two,” Louie said, motioning to Claus and Elric.

“Oi, you seriously want us to do that?”

Eduard nodded. “Please. Play along, would you?”

They both raised their hands as well, Claus reluctantly, Elric reservedly.

“Then I’ll also... No, I swear it on *my* sister’s life. Is that good enough for you?”

“I can just swear to God like a normal person, right? Mum’s the word.”

“Alright. I’ll talk. Be grateful,” Louie said pompously, leaning even farther forward. “Do you remember how a generation ago, the crown prince mysteriously died on his sickbed? Going in proper order, my father was the next in line, and he should have inherited the throne. However, he refused, and it fell to Henri, who was third. Don’t you find that strange?”

Eduard didn’t answer, and Louie carried on regardless.

“Now, here’s the first piece of truth. It wasn’t just the crown prince who mysteriously died. His twin sister was found dead at exactly the same time. Publicly, it’s stated that the princess died a week earlier, but that’s an obvious cover-up. The prince wasn’t present at her funeral, and they said it was because of his illness. During the prince’s funeral, no one was allowed to see in the coffin.”

“You hadn’t even been born yet.”

“My information comes from a trustworthy source. Ask anyone who was there, and they’ll say the same.” Louie paused for a moment to let it all sink in. “Here is the second truth. Just before the princess’ death was announced, a certain count was called to Ynys Negesydd. That count was appointed the instructor to a newly founded unit of land dragons, and he was granted a mansion that had previously belonged to the royal family. The strange thing is, his mansion was ready the day he arrived, but the documents officially appointing him to the post took a few days to go through. What’s more, his wife, the countess, had only just given birth to a son, yet she made the journey with her husband.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying the true objective of the emergency decree was the countess. Don’t you see?” Louie glared at Eduard, who maintained his passive, innocent face. “Don’t play dumb. You should have noticed by now.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“The princess gave birth on the verge of death. Or perhaps the child was cut from her corpse. The countess was called to secretly serve the role of a wet nurse.”

“What—” blurted Claus.

In a flash, Eduard turned to him with an index finger over his lips. Covering his mouth with the palm of his hand, Claus retreated a step.

“By the laws of Ignitia, the descendants of the eldest child take precedence. Let’s say I begrudgingly concede the validity of my father’s abdication. If the princess’ child reaches adulthood, then Henri must return the throne to him.”

“That would be the case, as long as the child hasn’t renounced his claim.”

“I thought you would say that, Eduard.” Louie theatrically stood. His tone patronizing, he went on. “Now, here’s the final piece. Before I was born, my father had tried and failed to have a child for many years. That was why he gave up on the throne. Yes, he gave up, and thus I am officially counted as third in line. But that isn’t true; don’t you get it yet? My father could never have a child. I am none other than the son of the late princess. I am the true king!” Louie stridently declared.

After a long moment of silence, Eduard opened his mouth. “Is that all there is to your claim?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m still waiting for you to finish. If you have nothing else to say, then take a seat already. Your throne is right behind you.”

“You insolent fool!” Despite the burning rage reddening his face, he did in fact take a seat.

“Incidentally, Louie, how old are you?”

“That’s pretty sudden. What does that have to do with anything?”

“I want to hear a clear answer from your mouth. Please, humor me.”

“I am fourteen. I will be fifteen come October.”

“How many years has it been since King Henri was enthroned?”

“Nineteen—no, about twenty, I believe.”

“Now, about the mysterious deaths of the prince and princess—by your own investigation, how many years ago did the incident take place?”

“Err, twenty years ago? W-Wait, hold on. Eduard, there’s something wrong.” Louie turned a ghastly shade of pale.

With a shrug, Eduard waited for him to recover. The following two minutes of the recording picked up nothing more than the sound of Louie hyperventilating.

“That’s strange. Why *is* that? A-Aren’t I supposed to be the secret son of the princess?”

“I honestly didn’t know where you were going with any of this. You were proudly speaking about a matter that had absolutely nothing to do with your legitimacy.”

“What...?”

“As for the secret son of the late princess—I know who it is. So long as he doesn’t come forward, I plan to take that information to the grave. Considering his personality, I doubt he’s going to assert his position and authority anytime soon.”

For just a brief instant, Eduard glanced at Elric, who nodded ever so slightly.

“Yes, I’m sure he wouldn’t come forth even if someone demanded it.”

Louie lifted his face. His brow was soaked with sweat.

“Now then, have you collected yourself? Be at ease, Louie. There is no doubt in my mind that you carry the blood of Ignitian royalty.”

“That’s right. I am a legitimate prince of Ignitia. I can ride a dragon better than anyone. My dragon is stronger than any other. I’m different from that cheating bastard, August.”

“You’re the cheat here, you bloody traitor.” His patience reaching its breaking point, Claus couldn’t help but let an insult spill from his lips.

“Claus?” Eduard calmly inquired.

“It’s nothing. You’re imagining it. Incantations can occasionally sound similar to insults. It may or may not be a well-documented phenomenon.” Claus shrugged, averted his eyes, and shuffled his spell cards.

“Moving on. I find it hard to believe that His Highness’ abilities are fake. At the

time, I wielded every form of perception magic at my disposal, but I didn't detect anything."

Frustrated, Louie only growled in response.

"For argument's sake, let's assume he *did* cheat through some unknown method that could fool all known forms of detection. And, impossible as it is, let's say he bid farewell to his inheritance due to his lack of riding ability. Even then, his brother Jules is next in line."

"Jules is three years old. He is too young to bear the responsibilities of kingship."

"Henri is healthy and young. Jules might be a splendid young man by the time the crown changes hands."

"No..." Louie's breathing grew unsteady once more. He toppled out of his chair, falling to his knees.

"You look like you're in pain. Should I call a healer?"

"Leave me. You just... want to... poison me," he wheezed.

"I don't care about you, but Charles will be sad if you die. No, to be perfectly honest, I don't really care about Charles either. But if you look at it the other way, your continued existence is of little consequence to me. Live on if you really want to."

"Blaergh... Haah, haah..."

When Louie's eyes were on the ground, Eduard turned and sent a hand sign to Claus. After he'd checked the values his magic returned on Louie's condition, Claus shook his head.

Eduard's expression clouded over for just a moment. However, by the time he turned back to Louie, he had already finished reforming his calm, smiling mask.

"I... Only I have this country's best interests in mind. Can that war-crazed Henri bring peace to Ignitia? That religious fanatic, Charles, is even worse. He's convinced that the people of the kingdom are God's chosen. Yet he's always finding fault with me, and he doesn't recognize a single thing I do. Every time he opens his mouth, by his second sentence, he's on about how *unholy Gigantia*

must be razed in sacred flames."

"That sounds like him. I agree with you there; he's a self-absorbed nutcase. However, his harshness toward you is probably a form of love."

"What nonsense. What do you know about my foolish brother?"

"Back when we first enrolled in the academy, Charles was our prefect."

Louie piped down before he grew hysteric. In a calm tone, Elric carried on where Eduard left off. "Eduard was especially close to Charles. Oh, that takes me back. Unholy Gigantia, eh? He's still on about that?"

"You should go see him sometime, Elric. If you wait around the chapel, you'll see him three times a day."

"Ahaha, I'll have to pass." While Elric's expression mostly remained the same, his brow furrowed in a way that made him seem terribly troubled.

Louie's eyes shifted between the two of them.

"You're misunderstanding the man called Charles Ode-Ignitia. Ever since he received a report of your arrest, he's been going to the chapel every day to pray for your rehabilitation. He abstained from meat and alcohol for the remainder of the festivities and is barely sleeping every night. He's an awkward man, you know. Though that might not be the sort of love you were looking for."

Still on his knees, Louie stared off into space. His intense waves of emotion had ebbed, leaving behind a deep and solemn sense of regret.

"Yes. Why... Why did I...? Eduard, please tell me—how are my dragons? Camellia and Sylvatica, how are they right now? Are they still alive?"

"They're alive. They can't fly, walk, or crawl, but they're alive."

"It's my fault... It's all my fault! I need to apologize to Camellia and Sylvatica! I've done something I can never take back..."

"That will be difficult, considering they are in Ichthyes. At the moment, you are neither permitted to travel nor to receive visitors."

"I see... Sounds about right. Why... Why did it come to this? My father chose those dragons for me. They're far more valuable than my life, and yet..." Tears

poured from Louie's eyes. His quiet sobs gradually grew into wails of lament. "Father told me I was to be a skilled knight who could support the king. My stepbrother said I would one day become an essential governor of these lands. Why was I so convinced I had to be king? Since when have I desired to usurp the throne? I left these southern lands, abandoned my duty... I did something so abominable as drive cursed nails into my dear dragons! Impossible... Inconceivable! Why? Someone tell me why!"

He pounded his fists onto the stone floor again and again. It only took a few times for the skin to tear and for blood to splatter over his hands, but he did not stop.

"Louie, can you hear me now?"

"Now what? What more could you want?"

For the first time that day, Louie looked Eduard straight in the eyes. Eduard sternly looked back at him through all his tears.

"I knew a man, once upon a time. We were in the same year, and we didn't get along. I hated him, and he shared the sentiment. Were you to ask me if I truly knew anything about him at all, I would have little to offer."

Louie just listened without interrupting. With a gloomy face, Elric looked down at the floor.

"But there was one thing I was certain of."

"What?"

"He was not the sort of man who would lay a hand on his own family. He was the last person who would ever slaughter his entire household. There was even a small child among them."

"Slaughter...? Are you talking about what happened in Lucanlandt last year?"

Eduard nodded. "Where did he go? Is he alive or dead? I don't know. But Louie, you are here, and you're still alive."

"Eduard, I..."

"Honestly, I despise you. I still hold a grudge against you for what you did to Erika. However, I don't see you as such an unjust human being. There is

someone who's taken advantage of your ambition and patriotism. Someone who's manipulating you. I want you to tell me who planted the idea in your head. You still have time. If it's not too late, you can still return to our side."

Eduard got down on one knee. From across the bars, he matched Louie's gaze and held out his hand.

Louie's hand shook as he hesitantly reached out. "Eduard... I'm begging you... Please... save me..." Just before their fingers brushed one another, Louie's hand dropped. He then rose to his feet in an uncanny fashion, as though he were being pulled up by some unseen string. "As if."

He cracked a smile, dark and hollow like a knothole in a tree. In the face of this sudden change, the other three reached for their weapons.

"Eduard Aurelia, you're hardly one to speak about delusions. ~~Save me.~~ What, you wanted a tearjerker where we all end up on the floor, crying together? Get with the times. These days, you won't even find that in a third-rate street performance."

Louie spread his arms out on either side of his head, his body shimmying from side to side like a court jester. His face was still fixed in the same inhuman smile.

"Oi, Eduard. This is—"

"Picking up any signs?"

"None. No reaction from Glámr-Sight, Analyze Dweomer, or any other detection spells. No magic exists in this room, save for what we've constructed ourselves."

Claus threw out a few extra spell cards. A number of detection spells were deployed, allowing the record to pick up even finer details. However, nothing seemed to show that Louie was being manipulated in any way.

"Hahaha. Of course not! Did you think I was some pitiful puppet on a string? ~~Someone, please.~~ What a naïve bunch you are. Why would I do any of this, if not of my own will?"

"Whose will would that be? You sound at odds with yourself."

“Hrm? Whatever are you talking about? I’m ~~someone~~ talking perfectly normally right now. ~~Help.~~”

“Elric, it might be pointless, but erect a protective circle.”

“Got it!”

Elric chanted a spell, deploying spell cards around Louie. However, the moment Claus saw what he was doing, he reeled him back in.

“Wrong! That spell’s no good! Reinforce the detection magic, Actorius!”

“Err, right away!”

Elric abandoned the spell he was constructing and took over the chant for the perception magic. This shifted the practitioner of the spell to him, which made the accuracy slightly lower from that point onward. The protective circle Claus deployed instead was quite different from Elric’s, all the way down to the finer details.

Louie watched the three of them scramble with a broad grin.

“Tch! Is he really not being controlled?!”

“You used a specialized spell for psychological attacks. Keep it up, Claus! If it can block any further meddling, it’s served its purpose.”

“As expected of a son of Hafan. You’re such a good kid. Even when you knew better than anyone here that I wasn’t being controlled. ~~Help.~~ You’re the purest and most exploitable one here. Without your scary guardian, you’d be the first one to crumble. ~~Save me.~~ I’ll take my time tormenting you bit by bit. Just like I did with August.”

“Bastard!”

The magic fueling Claus’ circle momentarily surged in concert with his anger. Surplus mana flooded out of his spell cards, dispersing in bursts of light. He concentrated on controlling his emotions, finally stabilizing the spell.

“Legitimacy is something that establishes itself after the fact. Guillaume didn’t become the Conquering King because he was beloved by God. It’s because he was a conqueror that legend says he must have been beloved by God. I’m no different. ~~Someone, please.~~ After I become king of Ignitia, I’ll make up some

legend that fits the bill. No matter what filthy means I use to usurp the throne, all that matters is that I win.”

“Even if it means selling out your nation to Gigantia?”

“Precisely. ~~Help me.~~ And what difference does it make? Ignitia’s already made ties with so many enemies. ~~Save me, pl—~~ Those Lucanlandt barbarians, you xenophobic Hafans. And Aurelia, a nation of lunatics.”

Claus trembled as he noticed something. From a certain point onward, his record of Louie’s emotional state—the traces of his fear and anguish—were extinguished completely.

“How dare you throw a wrench into my plans, Eduard. Someday, you’ll learn just how much of a mistake it was to go against me.” Louie lifted up his right hand and pointed it at Eduard. “Now, let me make a prediction, Eduard Aurelia—in six years, your dear younger sister, Erika, shall die a more repugnant death than anyone else. And when that happens, you’ll be just like me.”

After Louie gave them a conspicuously broken smile, the strength drained from his body, and he toppled to the floor. An analysis showed he had completely lost consciousness.

“Elric, get Charles and a healer! Claus, I don’t care what you do, just start casting some strong dispels!” Eduard screamed.

The other two reacted in an instant. By the time Elric reached the door, Eduard had destroyed the iron bars with his Disintegrate wand. Claus cast Break Enchantment, but Louie seemed unchanged.

The perception readings vanished as Elric left the room and the Ignitian scribe entered in his place.

Eduard pulled medical devices and medicines from his leather bag. He gave a brief explanation to the scribe as he examined Louie.

The record came to an abrupt end as the Historio Electrum was wrapped into Claus’ casting of Arcane Disjunction.



Classification: Gray

Class Number: 0006

Date: 1880/07/01

Location: Reconquista, Karkinos-Ignitia. Margrave's estate.



Claus Hafan was sitting at a table in a simple hut. Soon, Eduard Aurelia entered and locked the door behind him.

Eduard took a seat directly across from Claus.

"What now, Eduard? What good will my testimony do you?"

"Just in case. I don't suspect you of anything."

"Oh, I wonder about that. Not that I care either way. Honestly, I have no idea what just happened." Claus shook his head. There was a deep crease in his brow.

"I know this is quite a harsh incident to be involved in at the age of ten, but..."

"I don't need your concern. I calmed down a bit while you were talking to Actorius. That aside, it creeps me out when *you* of all people act reserved."

"That's quite a shock. Getting down to business, how did Louie appear to you?"

"Exactly the same as what's in the record. I don't know anything beyond that."

"I want your frank opinion. Tell me exactly what you felt at the time. Perhaps you noticed something I overlooked. Even if that isn't the case, it's always worthwhile to organize what we already know."

Eduard placed the piece of amber, encased in magic letters and faintly glowing like a live coal, on the table. Claus stared at it for a while, going back over the information recorded within.

"I still don't see any traces of magic or mind control."

"Anything else?"

“Whoever made Louie like that has quite the personality.”

“What’s your basis for saying that?”

Claus presented Eduard the readings recorded on the amber.

“We got a number of emotional readings far stronger than what you would find in a normal person. He pretty much started out at neutral levels, so the spikes are clear.”

“What emotions would that be?”

“Love, longing, loneliness, regret, and sorrow. It closely resembles the pattern seen right after losing a loved one. Considering what Louie did, it just doesn’t seem to fit.”

“That’s enough to break someone.”

Claus thought hard about Eduard’s words. Once Eduard finished going over the readings, he passed the amber back to Claus.

“When did Louie lose his parents?” Claus muttered, rolling it between his fingers.

“Four years ago. Both at the same time. It was an unfortunate accident. I’m sure neither Charles nor Louie was prepared to deal with it.”

“I see.”

The two of them fell silent.

After some time, Claus reluctantly spoke up. “But still, it’s been four years. These readings...”

“You think they’re unnatural?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never lost a relative before. I can only discern a state of mind from emotional readings because I was taught how. I don’t know anything about raw emotion; that’s out of my field.” Claus looked at his palm. “No, I almost lost someone dear to me before. She was just barely saved. If I’d lost her, I—” Claus paused, then looked back up at Eduard. “Didn’t Louie say something about that?”

“His prediction, eh?”

“You think Erika will be alright?”

“If Louie really had precognition, we wouldn’t have been able to catch him.”

“That’s true, but...”

Claus’ face filled with distress, but Eduard simply shrugged.

“If you want me to be honest with you, I can’t say I’m handling it well,” he said. “When I heard him say that, it felt like all the blood in my body froze over.”

“Even you can feel like that?”

“Hahaha, what sort of man do you take me for?” Eduard watched Claus stew in silence with a dark look on his face. “My heart is on the weaker side. That’s why I’m able to imagine how Louie was corrupted. What would be most painful if I was in Louie’s shoes? How would I go about breaking my own heart?”

“Wait. The way you put it makes it sound like someone explicitly set up Louie’s environment to break him.”

“Yes, it’s almost like it *was* set up. It happened just as Charles, who Louie couldn’t stand, graduated and returned from the academy. Immediately after, his parents died, and Charles inherited his father’s peerage. That was around the same time August’s dragon was supposed to hatch, too. If there are a few other factors that happened around that time designed to cause him anxiety...”

The smile faded from Eduard’s face. His eyes turned serious. Claus took this challenging look head-on.

“Are you the kind who laughs when everything comes together?” Eduard asked.

“I’m not laughing. Not at all. Not when there’s someone out there murdering people to bring about others’ downfalls... I nearly lost my sister to similar circumstances.”

“That’s right. Anyone could have been in Louie’s position. The gears bend ever so slightly, and fate rolls in a completely different direction.”

With that, their conversation came to an end. Eduard said no more on the subject, and Claus pondered away in silence. Eventually, he recalled the amber in his hand and set it on the table.

Upon retrieving it, Eduard fiddled with it until the playback stopped and the letters within it shifted to indicate that it had been sealed. He tucked it away, then took two keys from his pocket and placed them in front of Claus.

“I trust you, so I’m putting these in your care.”

“What are they for?”

“I’ve been gathering the light of stars in a particular place. Once there’s no light left to cling to in this world, perhaps those stars will be the last glimmer of hope.”

“Where is that?”

“You’ll know someday.”

“And when will that be?”

“Perhaps when I die and can’t protect Erika anymore.”

Claus kicked his seat, standing abruptly. Eduard had an unfathomable smile on his face.

“Eduard, you... You...!”

“We’re preparing for the off-chance. I’m not going to entrust my precious sister to anyone else that easily.” Eduard quietly stood and turned his back to Claus. “Now then, that’s all the time we have to chat. I need to discuss with Charles what we’ll do if Louie never wakes up.”

“Wait just one second.”

The severity of Claus’ voice caused Eduard to look back. The boy had taken a sealed letter from the inner pocket of his robe.

“Don’t tell anyone I gave this to you. I’m not supposed to show it to anyone outside of Hafan.”

“What’s in it?”

“The moment Louie fainted, I copied down the one spell I managed to see through. It didn’t look like it was the spell that put him in a coma. Still, I managed to analyze a large portion of the multilayered magic he was using to disguise it. Have a look at the practitioner’s name.”

Eduard opened the folded vellum, then immediately slammed it shut. “Cain Grendel... the last king of Casquetia, huh?”

“Don’t speak that name in front of anyone from Lucanlandt or Hafan. I can’t guarantee you’ll survive.”

“Do you think he’s the real one?”

“Who knows? Whether he’s real or fake, we’ll track him down, kill him, and bury him. That will be the end of it.”

“Why did you show that to me?”

“It’s not about you. I just don’t want to see Erika sad. It’s for my sake, really.”

Eduard carefully tucked the envelope into his overcoat. “Thank you. I’ll put this information to good use.”

“Be careful, Eduard. All the mad-king impersonators who’ve appeared over the years were competent in their own right.”

“You look out for yourself too, Claus. That cursed necklace that nearly lured you and your sister to your deaths... Its practitioner was also named Cain.”

Claus’ eyes grew wide and fierce, glaring daggers at empty space. As the emotions he had finally managed to shake off were dragged right back to him, his surging mana scattered in blue sparks all around him.

“You have my thanks, Eduard. That’s just what I wanted to hear.”

Claus’ face contorted in rage directed at this unseen foe, and Eduard gave him an ice-cold smile in return. After turning on his heels, Eduard left the room. This time, the Historio Electrum recording was shut off the proper way.



A single midsize ship drifted through the twilight. It had set sail from a port on the western edge of Karkinos’ northwestern peninsula. The ship was bound for an island, really no more than an isolated rock, about halfway between Karkinos and an archipelago southwest of it.

Two young men stood on deck: Elric and Eduard.

“Alright, that should get us back on track. We’ll be about half a day late, but

we should reach it just fine.”

After Eduard barked a few orders to the sailors, the ship moved like a living thing, gently swinging its bow around to face the opposite direction.

Such smooth operation was proof that, like a brain sending a pulse through the nervous system, Eduard’s orders had coursed through every nook and cranny of the body.

“A wonderful performance, Eduard.”

“No, it’s because you noticed the flock of sea serpents so quickly. I’m surprised you could detect submerged monsters without using magic.”

“The seabirds were moving unnaturally. Now, as for why that might be...”

Elric proceeded to explain the inherent traits of the birds and the unnatural paths of the schools of fish. Eduard couldn’t understand around seventy percent of such a technical explanation, but he still acted like it was a joy to listen to.

Once Elric was finished, he properly gave his thanks. “I’m glad I dragged you along. If we’d gotten any closer, we might not have survived.”

These past few years, the number of shipwrecks from sea serpent attacks around Karkinos’ coast had increased drastically. Without Elric’s quick wit, they really might have been dragged under, ship and all.

“Haha, that’s about all I’m good for, so I’m glad you found it useful.”

“Honestly, I didn’t want to impose this upon you, but...”

Initially, Claus was supposed to have accompanied them on the boat, but due to urgent business pertaining to the grave-desecration incident, he’d had to temporarily return to Hafan. Eduard had been forced instead to turn to Elric, who had been set to promptly return to the academy.

“Oh, is that why you’ve been troubling the Hafan heir so much lately?”

“Precisely. Though it’s also because Claus is so well trained, I can hardly picture him as a young boy.”

“He’s also indebted to you, so it works out in your favor. Oh, I’ve got it. Are

you secretly tempering him because he's a candidate to marry that little sister of yours?"

"I'm not nearly that kind. If I had to say, I'm bullying him *because* he's too close to my little sister." Contrary to his words, Eduard had a gentle look in his eyes.

Elric smiled wryly at his friend's openly malicious words, which were likely an attempt to hide his embarrassment. While Eduard seemed generally uninhibited, he was as overprotective as a mother whenever his sister was concerned.

"Come to think of it, Eduard, what are we investigating this time?"

"There's an altar on a small island with a meager population of fifty. It's apparently an important point on a ley line."

"Hmm, a ley line? All the way out there?"

Eduard nodded, but that just gave way to a new question. If it was an important point on a strong ley line, then even if it was remote, someone should have used its mana to build a transfer gate by now.

"This is a request from Lindis, right? They didn't give you permission to use the gate?"

"No, there's no gate there. Maybe they didn't want to disturb the old altar, but they never installed one."

Eduard took a roll of parchment from his bag and handed it to Elric. These documents were sealed with a stamp indicating that they were from the church. A few portions were redacted with black ink, but the message was clear enough.

"A sorcery system to supply angels with mana... Hmm, who would've thought angels really existed?"

"Even if we do find the facilities, the existence of angels themselves is still unconfirmed. At the very least, I think some form of phantasmic beast once made use of those services."

"The mechanics are still not fully understood. If that's the case, I can see why

they didn't want to hazard tapping into that energy for a transfer gate."

Various portions of a sorcery system built by an ancient civilization were still beyond the understanding of modern magic and alchemy. The information and techniques had been scattered or lost. Some degraded with time, and others had been destroyed by magic beasts.

Seeing that Elric seemed to understand the mission, Eduard moved on to explaining their target. "It's a particularly major altar among the ones that exist all over Karkinos, and there's a theory it might be able to influence all the others. Apparently, they found quite a few that are similar to it."

"Really... Doesn't that make it quite a vulnerable place to exploit?"

"We thought so, at least. That's why a joint effort between the church and the academy was dispatched before us. The team was supposed to investigate, if possible, destroy any vulnerabilities, and rebuild it to be more structurally sound. You'll find their results on page eight."

Elric flipped through the papers. What he came upon was a record of a tragic incident, a serious curse that had infected every single member of the investigation team. He inadvertently clasped a hand over his mouth at such a grim report.

"Do you think it's an ancient trap?"

"That's not confirmed, but I presume it's been maliciously altered in the last two to three hundred years. Its vulnerability being another of those modifications," Eduard said with a certain level of conviction.

Only a traitor, a madman, or an atheist could have done such a thing. Elric hadn't a clue which it was, but they were all troublesome in their own way.

"I see, this is definitely a job made for Eduard Aurelia." He nodded.

With his golems, the alchemist Eduard Aurelia could safely investigate without having to worry about curses. He was well versed in excavating ancient ruins, and he had a perfect track record of fulfilling royal decrees. As far as Elric knew, Eduard was the perfect man for the job.

"The request I have of you is on the last page. I'd appreciate it if you could

check it before we arrive.”

“Hmm, I see. Then I’ll—whoa!”

The moment Elric corrected his crooked glasses and looked at the memo, the ship suddenly lurched to one side. Losing his balance, Elric was about to fall, but Eduard quickly held him up.

“I’m really sorry. How many times does that make?”

“You can’t help it. Last year’s wound still stings, right?”

Eduard released the man and stared out at the sea. The sun was sinking beyond the horizon.

“Incidentally, how did Louie look to you?”

“Hmn... Ahh, him? I felt a little sorry for him. Oh, and for Charles as well,” Elric answered a little uneasily.

Eduard hesitated a bit before explaining himself. “I was thinking that some aspects of Louie’s condition reminded me of him. I want to know: did he have a muddy consciousness like Louie? Were there any traces that he was being controlled?”

Elric’s eyes widened as he stared at Eduard. The usual smile had completely faded from Eduard’s face.



“I see. So that’s why you invited me.”

“I heard that you remained conscious the longest, so you should know best.”

“Claude was as lucid as could be.”

It was finally Eduard’s turn to be surprised. He pressed further, as if he had been presented with something which defied belief. “Even after what he did?”

“Yes, he was incredibly rational. I can guarantee he wasn’t acting in a daze. But why did he try to kill us, only to stop just short of the final blow? What did he do after the three of us lost consciousness? Why couldn’t I have stopped him back then? They’re all questions I still don’t have an answer for, Eduard,” Elric said plainly, looking him right in the eye.

His tone was gentle as usual, but it was clear there were many conflicting emotions racing around his expression. Regret and despair, anger and hatred. Those emotions were probably meant for the man called Claude, but it felt to Eduard as if he were the one they were directed toward, and for a moment he was lost for words.

“Thank you, Elric,” he finally replied after a conspicuously strong, salty breeze blew him out of his stupor. “I was worried Louie would go mad and cause a similar incident. I just had to ask.”

“It’s alright, Eduard. It’s not going to happen again. If it does, well, you’ll be there to prevent it next time,” Elric said matter-of-factly. He had regained his smile.

“You make it sound so easy.”

“What else am I supposed to say? I believe you can do it.”

“That said, if you’ll let me speak my honest mind, there’re so many problems going on these days, I can’t get around to all of them.”

Eduard sighed as he thought of all the matters he’d been involved with as of late. It was like he was under the influence of a deep-rooted curse—a curse that made all his investigations ultimately reach an impasse.

“My, it’s not like you to act so weak.”

“I might just be imagining it, but I can’t help but feel it’s all part of a much bigger chain of events. Perhaps this is a prelude to an incident even worse than what happened in the north.”

How much better would it be if it was all just my imagination? Eduard added to himself. An heir to the throne who had gone insane under the influence of the Mad King, and a necklace cursed by the Mad King as well. Neither of them had been dangerous enough to bring the world to ruin, but both cases were simply brimming with malicious intent.

Not to mention the resemblance it all had to an incident that surrounded Eduard’s mother. As he became prisoner to these thoughts, he smiled through his troubles.

“Eduard, are you...?”

“Just as you noticed the sea serpents from the movements of the birds, I’m sure I must continue to carefully scrutinize even the smallest of incidents.”

When he looked in the distance, at the encroaching night sky, Eduard could faintly make out a flock of seabirds flying to faraway lands. The world around him grew darker and darker, as if to warn him that something sinister lay ahead.













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Deathbound Duke's Daughter: Volume 2

by Terasu Senoo

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020